**Service Sunday 25th October 2020**

**Welcome**

**Hymn 270 Put all your trust in God**

1 Put all your trust in God,

in duty's path go on;

walk in his strength with faith and hope,

so shall your work be done.

Give to the winds your fears;

hope, and be undismayed;

God hears your sighs and counts your tears,

God shall lift up your head.

2 Through waves, and clouds, and storms

he gently clears your way;

await his time; so shall this night

soon end in joyful day.

Leave to his sovereign sway

to choose and to command;

then you shall marvel at his way

how wise, how strong his hand!

3 You see our weakness, Lord;

our hearts are known to you:

give strength to every failing hand

and keep our footsteps true.

Let us, in life, in death,

your steadfast truth declare,

confessing, with our final breath,

your love and guardian care.

**Prayer of approach**

Holy and eternal God,

As we gather to worship you this morning, here in this building and connected at home, we remember

that you are the one who holds our times in your hands.

Your know us before we were born, you watch over our lives as we grow and develop and you are with us at our end.

Where our lives have a beginning and an inevitable end, you are everlasting; you were there throughout the ages, are with us now and will remain always.

We give you thanks that we can rest in you and in your enduring love.

As we will hear your word today, we pray, speak to us personally and move us. As we hear about the death of Moses, may we be reminded of what really matters in our lives and in death. May we be encouraged and comforted by the vision that you set before us, of your kingdom come.

Keeping our eyes fixed on the future that you are bringing closer,

Let us pray the prayer that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever amen.

**Intro to the reading**

For the past 2 months I have been following the suggested readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, in particular the readings from the book of Exodus. These are now coming to an end or rather in the lectionary a jump is made to a reading from Deuteronomy and then to the book of Joshua. This is to give us a bit of quick overview of what happened next to the people of Israel when they were eventually led out of the wilderness into the promised land. The passage from Deuteronomy that we will read in a moment, describes Moses death and informs us that Joshua now becomes his successor.

**Reading Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

**The death of Moses**

**34**Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, opposite Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land – from Gilead to Dan, **2**all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, **3**the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. **4**Then the Lord said to him, ‘This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, “I will give it to your descendants.” I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.’

**5**And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. **6**He buried him[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+34&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-5846a)] in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. **7**Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. **8**The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

**9**Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+34&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-5849b)] of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.

**10**Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, **11**who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. **12**For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

**Sermon**

Is it possible to die well? If I’d ask you what you would consider a good death, I wonder what you would say. Would you want to die suddenly and quietly, perhaps in your sleep, without really being aware or anticipating death?

If you were ill, would you prefer to be at home to spend your final days and hours, or would you rather be in hospital – the doctors having done all they can to keep you going?

I wonder if you’ve ever talked about this with those close to you. We are culturally very reticent about thinking, let alone talking about our own death or that of someone close to us.

It is of course true that on one level we don’t have much control over death, that is the whole point of why it is so scary to us. So even though we might have an ideal ‘dying well’ scenario in mind, there is no guarantee that this is how it will happen.

But not thinking and talking, nor preparing for the end of our lives, will make it harder to have a good death. If we do think, talk and prepare, if nothing else we increase the chances that our passing will be easier for those who are left behind, and perhaps for us too.

You might wonder why I raise this in a sermon, seems a strange topic. In fact if you’re watching on line, you may have already switched over! But we heard this morning how Moses – the great Moses – finally meets his end. And I thought it would be a good occasion to talk about death and preparing for it. That’s not to be depressing, but to get some things in the open that I think are important for us all.

The end of Moses’ life is a bit strange: he goes up Mount Nebo, sees the promised land stretched out in front of him and dies. It doesn’t say how. He is buried, but we don’t know where or how.

However, Moses had seen his death coming, he’d said to the people in chapter 31: ‘I am now 120 years old and I am no longer able to lead you.’ God had made clear to him that he would not enter the promised land. Instead Joshua was appointed as the new leader of the people of Israel.

So Moses was prepared for his own death and he made sure the people were as prepared as they could be. In fact, the whole book of Deuteronomy is presented as Moses’ final speech or teaching to the people.

Moses wants to impress on them the most important things that need to remember as they will enter the promised land. Moses recaps for them their history, what they’d experienced with God in the wilderness. And he stresses that they are to *listen* to God, they need to love and obey God and his commandments. If they do this they will experience blessing and life, but if they depart from God, from his covenant, they will experience curse and death.

At the end of his speech, Moses prophesies that the people will not keep to the covenant and be exiled away from the promised land, until God will regather their descendants and give them new hearts, hearts that will be truly receptive and obedient to God.

And now, at the very end of the book, Moses’ death is recorded and the people mourn for 30 days.

*What can we learn from this story?*

I’m going to number my points, don’t usually do this, but it will help you to keep track I hope! There’s 5…

1. Life and death can seem unfair, but we when the time comes we have to let go.

It seems strange, perhaps cruel that Moses after all this time of service to God was not permitted to enter the promised land. The reason given in Deuteronomy 32 is an earlier incident were Moses and Aaron did not follow God’s express instructions how to give water to a complaining people.

At the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says that he’s being punished on account of the sins of the people. He says: ‘Because of you the Lord became angry with me also and said ‘you’ll not enter it either’ (Deut 1:37). Moses is of the same generation that has been refused entry into the promised land on account of their rebellion and disobedience.

A new generation will instead take possession of the land.

Still – it seems rather harsh to us though.

Even though we can’t quite figure out whether this is fair or not for Moses, it seems in the end to be accepted. This tells us something about death too. We must let go. We relinquish control. God’s reasoning remains a mystery to us. We trust that he withholds no good thing from those who love him, but we humans cannot always see this.

1. It’s good to be aware of our mortality and to prepare for our death.

Moses knew his life was drawing to a close and he prepared not only himself but only the people for this. He took the time to talk about both the past and the future with the people he was leading. He did not stick his head in the sand or skirt around difficult conversations.

Now, some of us are of an age that realistically they have not got many more years to live. Others might know this because of their health condition. Some of us – might assume that death is a long way away, but really none of us knows what is round the corner. That is not being gloomy, that is life.

Whilst our culture prefers to hide death away, in times gone past ‘memento mori’ was a motto for good living. ‘Remember you must die’ – this was to inspire conscious and intentional living.

Sometimes those who have been given a diagnosis of terminal illness, actually start appreciating life and relationships much more. They are more conscious of the fact that each moment counts, and that there is much to be thankful for. They may be much more intentional about doing the things that they really want to do, or having the conversations that they really needed to have.

During the Covid pandemic we’ve all been confronted with death more than normal, if not in our personal circle than on the news. Perhaps we should grasp this opportunity to speak more openly with our loved ones.

As someone who helps people organise funerals, it is really helpful if the deceased person has been prepared and has communicated their wishes. Moses might have had an unusual kind of funeral that did not require anyone else’s input, but ours will not happen just like that. Why not write down what hymns you’d like, whether you’d want to be buried or cremated, if you have any favourite bible passages, or perhaps even a theme or a message that you’d want to share with those left behind?

There are other useful preparations we can make, whatever our age: write a will, arrange power of attorney, write an advance directive about what kind of medical interventions you would or wouldn’t want.

1. Perhaps the most important thing is to **have conversations** with those who are closest.

I am sometimes amazed that the children of church members don’t really have any sense of how faith mattered to their parents’. In planning a funeral they are really then at a loss to express this.

Talking about these practical things, can open up opportunity for conversations about the most important things in our lives. It might not be easy, but it is precious.

And perhaps, we know that there are relationships that need mending, before it is too late. Apologies might need to be made, or reconciliation sought. Whilst we cannot rewrite the past, we still have time in the present to make amends.

1. We need to mourn and grieve together and take time for this.

We read that the people of Israel mourned for 30 days apparently because of Moses’ role in the community. It has been very difficult for those who have been bereaved during this time of Covid, to have a normal funeral. We realise once more how much shared rituals can help. I personally don’t like it when poems are read that say; ‘don’t cry or be sad over me’. Because it seems to take away people’s permission to grieve and mourn, which is natural. We don’t have to pretend that nothing bad has happened. There is a time of mourning… and it is right for us all *to mourn with those who mourn*.

5. Facing our end in the light of God’s future

Finally, of course it is hard, impossible perhaps to really conceive our own death. It is natural to be afraid of our own passing. Even with a Christian faith, and the assurance of Christ, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life, even though they die… it is still a mysterious and daunting journey that we all have to make.

The Bible does not try to fudge around this; it calls death the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor 15:26). So death is an enemy, not a friend. However, it is an enemy that has been conquered by Jesus Christ, and that will eventually be destroyed. Death will not have the last word.

Those who die with Christ will also live with him (Romans 6:8).

I’m sure it would have been hard for Moses to make that long lonely last climb up Mount Nebo. He had to leave his people behind. He would not himself reach the promised land. And yet his end had come.

God gave him a preview though, a view of the promised land stretching out in front of him. God would continue with the people and keep this promises. This perhaps would have made it easier for Moses to make his peace with his own death.

We through Christ’s resurrection have been given a preview of the promised land. We’re not there yet, but know that God is making all things new and his kingdom will come.

**Conclusion:**

I asked at the start if it is possible to die well. I think it is, although of course we don’t know when and how we will die. We can work towards a good death, by

1. Being willing to let go even when death feels unfair
2. Being prepared in practical terms
3. By having conversations about death with those who are closest to us
4. By grieving and mourning together
5. And finally by facing our death in light of God’s future

I have heard nurses say that in their experience often people of faith have far more peaceful deaths. Somehow having faith makes it easier to let go when their time has come. I hope the same will one day be true for you and me, with God’s grace

Amen.

**Hymn 54 Lord you have always been our home**

**Prayer of dedication and intercession**

God, we acknowledge once more that all our times in your hand. We offer now to you our daily living, our work, our relationships, our waking and our sleeping.

We offer you also our worries and our tears, knowing that you hear our sighs and count our tears, and trusting that you will lift up our head.

Take all of us, our living and our dying, may it all be to the glory of your name. In the name of Jesus who gave his life so we might live.

We pray for those who are sick and feel vulnerable, especially at this time of pandemic. God give protection and healing.

We pray for those who are at the end of their lives and dying, God give hope and peace.

We pray for those who are young and healthy and cannot conceive of death at all. Help them to live as if each day matters. God give wisdom.

We pray for those who are caring for others who are at the end of their lives, and are worried, sad and exhausted. God give strength.

We pray for those who work in medical and caring professions, who know that death is a part of life, help them to care with wisdom and attention, knowing when to act and when to refrain from intervening. God give love and care.

We pray for all those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, who are hurting and perhaps alone, especially at this time. God give solace and comfort.

In the silence we pray for those things and people on our own minds….

God give us faith, to face our own mortality in the light of your future. Help us to hold on to the vision that you will make all things new, and will one day wipe the tears from our eyes.

In the name of Jesus, who died, has risen and is alive with you for ever. Amen

**Hymn 237 Look forward in faith**

**Benediction**

Now go into this world, look forward in faith, all time is in God’s hand.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and for evermore, amen.