

One of the themes of the readings today is that one subject that most human beings seem to fear and dread: death.

It's the first word of the first reading; it comes up again in the gospel – the tragic death of a twelve-year-old girl.

We have all been blessed with the gift of life – and the will to live, the capacity to grow and be happy, so why does it all have to come to an end with death. Why sickness, illness, leading to death and extinction.

You often hear two different answers today.

The first one is the answer given by modern popular atheist authors such as Richard Dawkins: Death is part of the natural order of things. Bad things just happen, it is all a matter of chance, some are lucky some are not – its all beyond our control, we have no control over our destiny either - we just have to accept whatever life throws at us. Get on with this life, make the most of it, for this is all we have got.

The second one you sometimes hear on the lips of religious people when someone dies: it was God's will, - We have to be careful here that we don't say that God causes someone to die – or to say that God does

something evil, or that he punishes people's sins by sending disease and misfortune – wouldn't we hate a God who did that?

Listen again to the first reading : Death was not God's doing – and he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living; he made man imperishable, in his own image.

It was the devil's envy that brought evil into the world this is a reference to the fall of man.

So death and evil are connected, one is a consequence of the other, and it was never God's intention that either should spoil his creation.

So God does not cause death nor does it makes sense to say that a God who is all goodness would deliberately send evil things like disease. Although we have to admit that he allows it. He takes us to himself, but that's different from saying he causes death; when death has had its evil way with us, God brings us into his presence, he takes us to himself so that death does not have the last word.

So in God's great scheme of things the death of the human body is not so very terrible, it seems like it to

us, especially when there is pain and suffering involved; especially, as in the gospel, it is the death of a child; the worst thing imaginable for a parent - but the real tragedy as far as God is concerned is the eternal separation of a human soul from him as a result of sin, which is why he sent his Son to die for us. Very often, when the bible speaks of death, it means the eternal death of the soul as opposed to the spiritual healing after bodily death, which is eternal life.

In the gospel, the people laugh at Jesus when he says "the girl is not dead, she is asleep" what does he mean here? I think we can assume that she had died, given all the mourning and weeping. Perhaps he meant that she had not experienced the eternal death which is separation from God. Or it could mean that Jesus miraculously raised her before he arrived at the house, when he the father, "Do not be afraid, only have faith". So perhaps she was just asleep when he went in and took her by the hand. Whatever the truth of it, we can never know, but what we do know is that Jesus is the master of death, and he raises this little girl as a sign of the resurrection to come, his own, and ours. With this same faith and hope, we can face our own death.

Many of you will remember the courageous example of Cardinal Basil Hume, who died in 1999. He had terminal cancer, and he was able to face his diagnosis and impending death with great courage and hope. He was able to do so because of his deep faith in eternal life. He wrote about it in his book "The Mystery of the Cross":

The human mind cannot understand death. We face it with fear and uncertainty, revulsion even; or we turn away from the thought for it is too hard to bear. But faith gives answers when reason fails. The strong instinct to live points to immortality. Faith admits us into death's secrets. Death is not the end of the road, but a gateway to a better place. It is in this place that our noblest aspirations will be realised. It is here that we will understand how our experiences of goodness, love, beauty and joy are realities which exist perfectly in God. It is in heaven that we shall rest in him and our hearts will be restless until they rest in God.