**THE SWISS CHURCH IN LONDON**

**Sunday service, 19 September 2021**

**Welcome**

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this audio service from the Swiss Church in London. We celebrate in the name of God, our parent, of Jesus Christ, our friend and saviour, and the holy spirit, who connects us across all borders. Amen

I hope that you are doing well, wherever you are right now, and that you can enjoy these last warm days of the year. Life is beautiful, and sometimes painful. Life is a precious gift, fragile and full of miracles. Life is what happens every day and every second when we are busy doing things.

May we in this coming half hour come to appreciate life more fully and starting into this day or evening with a grateful heart.

Let us pray.

**Prayer**

Good God

It is easy to trust you when life is good, but when circumstances change then faith is suddenly put to the test. When one problem, one anxiety, one sorrow follows another, we feel overwhelmed.

Teach us to trust that however fierce the storm, it can never finally swamp us. You will be there to rescue us in our time of need. You will keep hold of us until the storm is past and calm returns.

Make us generous of heart, warm of spirit and forgiving in attitude.

Reach out to us as we worship together apart through this audio service and send your holy spirit to connect us across the city, the country and indeed the whole world.

Amen

**Isaiah 38:1-8**

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, “Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: “Go and tell Hezekiah, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

“‘This is the Lord’s sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.’” So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.

**Sermon**

*Human life ends with death*

Like all life on earth, human life ends with death. We all know it and it’s a truth that concerns everyone, and yet we rarely speak it out loud. Death is particularly challenging for us humans, because unlike other creatures we are conscious of our mortality. We know that our days on earth are limited. We know that death can come in many different ways and that life can be eradicated in a split second. I sometimes think it’s a miracle that we manage to get on with the nitty-gritties of daily life, pursuing our dreams and building loving relationships in the full knowledge that it can suddenly be over. This knowledge leaves us no choice but to deal with death as part of life.

There are times in life when our mortality is more prevalent, for instance in times of acute illness or threat, when we have lost someone or when we are getting older. And there are times in life when it’s easy to forget how fragile life is and we feel invincible. The prospect of death triggers anxiety and desperation in some. Others are at peace with the fact that our days on earth are limited. For all of us, death is unpredictable, final and often brutal and unfair.

What is the purpose of life if we are all going to die anyway? And what is the purpose of death for our lives?

*Mortality in the Bible*

Philosophy and theology have been trying to answer these questions for centuries, and the Bible is a particularly insightful document. The answers are as diverse as human life. The early scriptures in the Old Testament are very matter-of-factly about human mortality. “Dust you are, and to dust you will return” says the Book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 19. In the early biblical scriptures, the fate of the dead is irrelevant and of little significance for the living. Death separates us from God who is the God of the living, not of the dead. In the newer scriptures of the Old Testament however there is a shift. The idea emerges that life is not over with death. There is mentioning of the resurrection of the dead, for instance in the Book of Prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37 where God breathes new life into the dead bodies in the valley of bones. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the resurrection hope that is rooted in the Old Testament scriptures.

The New Testament is ambivalent about the purpose of death, too. One the one hand, death is the price that we pay for our sins, according to Paul’s letter to the Romans. Death interferes with our relationship with God. Yet at the same time, death also reunites us with God and brings an end to a life that’s been alienating us from God. All sins are forgiven through the resurrection of Christ. There is grace in death.

So, what is the meaning of death according to the Bible? Separation from or reunion with God? Punishment for our sins or eternal grace? The diversity of interpretations really is confusing, and at the same time it shows how people throughout the ages have desperately tried to make sense of death, and its purpose for life, trying to find answers for one of the biggest questions of life.

*King Hezekiah’s final years*

One who struggled with his end was King Hezekiah. He was the 13th King of Judah and is mentioned in the Book of Prophet Isaiah. According to the biblical narrative, Hezekiah witnessed the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and was also King of Judah during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

The King became very ill and was at the point of death. He was distraught and he wept bitterly. He prayed to God listing all the good things that he had done in his life, assuring his wholehearted devotion and faithfulness – and God granted Hezekiah an extra 15 years.

How many years do we have left? Do you ever ask yourself this question? And what would you do with your remaining time if you knew?

The reformer Martin Luther famously answered this question with the following words: “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

Unlike King Hezekiah we don’t know how many years we have left. If you knew, what would you change? How would you judge your current priorities? What are the things that we can change, starting today? And what are the dreams that realistically we must let go? These questions are worth asking ourselves from time to time.

Every day that is given to us on earth is an opportunity for change. And even if our movements or possibilities are restricted, there are still many small things, attitudes, thoughts, and patterns that we can do differently to grow even more into that person that God has called us to be. Martin Luther planted his apple tree. Hezekiah carried on being king and defending his city against the enemy.

*Sunlight on the steps*

People often ask me how I come up with my topics for sermons. Sometimes I follow the reading order of the reformed church in Switzerland. Sometimes I talk about something that I have been thinking about. Today’s topic is a particularly interesting case. A few weeks ago, I received the newspaper of the German-Protestant Church in London. The Reverend, a good colleague of mine, had written an article about stairs. I thought that this would be an unusual and nice topic to preach about. So, I looked up on google what the Bible says about stairs and came across the verse from Isaiah: “The sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.” I imagined sitting on the warm steps of a staircase in the autumnal evening sun. A beautiful feeling! I opened the Bible to read the verse in its context and discovered that it was part of Hezekiah’s struggle to coming to terms with his final days, and the extra days that were given to him. So, my sermon became a reflection on mortality and the purpose of life and death.

The story of Hezekiah’s final years ends with the gleaming image of a set of steps bathed in sunlight. The steps had been overshadowed in the face of Hezekiah’s death but were once again bathed in light as Hezekiah was granted more years to live. God had turned back the clock and brought back the light.

So, although my sermon in the end was not about stairs as initially intended, let us finish with image of light flooded steps. God’s rays of light cast away the shadows. Those are the moments, sitting on warm steps flooded by sunlight, when everything seems worth it and life despite its limitations, or perhaps because of it, makes perfect sense.

May those moments be many in your life and accompany your every day.

Amen

**Prayers of Intercession**

Gracious God, we pray, be with us in our waking and our sleeping. Be with us in our joy and in our grief. Be with us in our anxiousness and fear; and be with us when we go about our daily life. In this very moment, let your light shine on all the people on your wonderful planet, wherever they are, whatever they believe and whoever they aspire to be. You are the God of all, in all and around all.

Life giving God, bless the children and youth as they begin a new school year. Give them enquiring minds, wisdom and understanding. Set those who belong to our communities on firm foundations, that they may flourish in mind, body and spirit. Inspire us all with your peace and justice and bring us always delight in your truth, hidden from our eyes, accessible with our hearts.

And healing God, embrace and comfort all those hit by tragedy and whose hearts ache with grief. Console those whose world has been shattered and whom no words can console. Heal and transform their broken hearts. Raise the dead to new life that all may sing songs of praise and thankfulness.

Amen