

READING

Psalm 90

SERMON

I Want To Live Forever

On April 15, 1989 a football match was taking place between Liverpool Football Club and Nottingham Forest Football Club. It was an FA cup semi-final game and so it was being played on a neutral ground in Sheffield – the home of Sheffield Wednesday. Sheffield Wednesday were no strangers to hosting big occasion football matches, so this semi-final at Hillsborough was seen to be no different to any other football match being played on a neutral ground.

However as it turned out, the football match was never played that day, but sadly some 96 football fans from Liverpool FC lost their lives. Their names are on a memorial at Anfield football ground – the home of Liverpool FC.

I would like to look at just one name on that list, one Anthony David Bland called Tony Bland. Tony went to that football match at the age of 18, but his age at death on the memorial is recorded as 22. On the fateful day in April 1989, Tony Bland suffered serious injuries in the crush at the Leppings Lane terrace of Hillsborough football ground. He suffered crushed ribs and two punctured lungs. This caused an interruption in the supply of oxygen to his brain. As a result, he sustained catastrophic and irreversible damage to the higher centres of the brain, which left him in a Persistent Vegetative State.

Tony was transferred to the care of Dr J. G. Howe, a consultant geriatrician at the Airedale General Hospital in West Yorkshire. Dr Howe had a great deal of experience in treating those who were in a Persistent Vegetative State. Several attempts were made by Dr Howe and his team, along with Tony's sister and mother, to try to elicit some response from him and for some signs of revival. However, all attempts failed. He showed no sign of being aware of anything that took place around him. EEG and CT scans revealed that whilst the brain stem remained intact, there was no cortical activity. His body was being kept alive by breathing tubes and he was being fed artificially. But to all intents and purposes the person who was Tony Bland was gone and there was no reasonable possibility of recovery.

As Christians we know that euthanasia is wrong and that we should not kill people off before their time, although the subject of mercy killings, of assisting someone to die when they are in intense pain may be another matter. However this morning we look at the statement

I Want To Live Forever

And there are some that want to do just that, living forever. It is said that Walt Disney had himself frozen in a cryonic chamber full of liquid nitrogen upon his death, and that he now awaits the day when medical technology makes his re-animation possible. Is this as Micky Mouse or Pluto – we may never know! There are those that believe that, but there are also those who say that it is an urban legend that has grown up because of various reasons:

- The privacy Walt Disney maintained concerning his personal life extended to his death
- There was a lack of details available about his funeral and burial arrangements
- He has a reputation as a technological innovator

So the story of Disney's cryonic suspension came into being and has remained ever since

Again we have songs that have the line in them

I Want To Live Forever

[VIDEO CLIP OF 'FAME']

It may be that the song is only talking about living forever in one's art, one's reputation living on, or is it?

At one time the only way to live forever was to become one of these – a vampire. They live forever according to the films. But now, due to Medical Science we can live longer – but we can live forever?

In the realms of films we have living forever by cloning – I become a younger me just as I die. Or if you are Doctor Who you regenerate when one body is getting too old – or the actor is leaving the series. In one film I saw, a young woman's brain was transplanted into another woman's body. Another way of living forever? In other Science Fiction scenarios brains are kept in jars, with optical and audio and vocal setups so they can communicate with the outside world – but of course in a limited way.

However we do have medical science that means we can live longer, we can be kept alive artificially, seemingly artificially. When someone is having a heart operation, they might be put on a heart lung machine which means that the body is being kept alive by a machine – however we think that this is good because it saves lives and when the new heart is put in to the recipient, the machine is then switched off and the new heart takes over.

In the case of Tony Bland his body was being kept alive by breathing tubes and he was being fed artificially. But to all intents and purposes the person who was Tony Bland was gone and there was no reasonable possibility of recovery. But what to do about it?

- Should the machine be switched off?
- If there is even a glimmer of hope, isn't it worth hanging on for?
- Is turning the machine off just killing someone?
- What about the feeding artificially – should this be taken away?

In the reading we read

“The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”
(Psalms 90:10 NIV)

The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength (Psalm 90:10). But Tony was only eighteen, not eighty. So where else can we go in the Bible to for an answer?

Turn with me to Job 1, page 507. In the first part of the chapter, God and the devil have a conversation about Job and his faith. Satan says that Job has faith and is blameless and upright because he has wealth, a large family and wants for nothing, so why shouldn't he be upright and blameless. So God gives Satan his head to do what he likes with Job, but that he could not lay a finger on Job. We pick it up in verse 13

“One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."" (Job 1:13-21 NIV)

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised (Job 1:20). All is in the hands of God. Job had lost his possessions, his family – al except his wife and she they goes on to give him grief, and ultimately his life. And again at the end of Job in chapters 38 to 41 you have God giving a glorious description in the form of questions to Job about the greatness and glory and control of creation that God has – which by inference, also means the ending of a life. Reading those chapters are fantastic and this afternoon for homework, why not do that, but for now as short part of it

"Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendour, and clothe yourself in honour and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you." (Job 40:8-14 NIV)

God is in control, not us. Sadly, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, our bodies have always been designed to wear out, we are designed to die. In life there are only two certainties they say – death and taxes!

So on the one hand we have

- that God is sovereign and so is over life and death

but on the other hand we have that

- God gives us medical advances for us to use.

It is a dilemma!

So why mention Tony Bland? As was said earlier

In the case of Tony Bland his body was being kept alive by breathing tubes and he was being fed artificially. But to all intents and purposes the person who was Anthony Bland was gone and there was no reasonable possibility of recovery.

Tony's case went to court. The courts had to decide whether it was right to deny Tony food and water and let him die from starvation and dehydration. He was being given food and drink artificially and this meant that he was not dying, but that he was continuing in a Persistent Vegetative State. Not an easy decision for the family, doctors or the courts to decide. Eventually the courts did and Tony Bland died on 3 March 1993 aged twenty-two after having spent four years in a Persistent Vegetative State.

Were they right or wrong? Is life something to be clung onto at all cost? As Christians we do believe that life is for eternity. As Jesus said

“After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:1-3 NIV)

...this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3). But this eternal life begins now but then goes on after death. Death for Christians is not the end, but a transition of eternal life on earth to eternal life in heaven. We have such a continuation of life to look forward to when we are going to be in heaven in the presence of God, worshipping him. Why should we deny ourselves that or deny others. If we do cling onto life then it means we are living as a practical atheist, because we see no more than this life and this life alone.

It is not right for a Christian to cling onto life at all cost? It is not right for someone to be kept alive at all cost? As Job says again

“Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No-one! Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired man.” (Job 14:1-6 NIV)

God sets the limit on our lifespan – we may disagree about the length of our own life, or the life of someone else, and at times that can be difficult. If someone is young we pray for their healing, you know when you are old because people begin to pray for you to slip away peacefully!

So is it right to pull the plug on someone? Is it right to turn off the machine? Is it right to stop feeding artificially? I would say that it is when all medical means have been exhausted and that all that is happening is that the life is being prolonged artificially.

I can remember in Nottingham, one of our elderly gentlemen at church went into hospital, and in reality it was to die. But he was fighting, fighting, fighting. His family all knew he was going to die, in a matter of a few weeks or even days, but they did not tell him or want him to be told that he was dying, so he was struggling to stay alive because he felt that he had to, to go back home.

Then one day a doctor on his ward was from the church and the doctor was visiting the patient and the patient asked point blank if he was dying. The doctor being a Christian would not lie and so answered truthfully and on further questioning all the truth came out, but the doctor was only answering questions, so had not as the family as asked, told the aging parent and grandparent, the prognosis. The patient then stopped struggling to live, and began to die peacefully, not trying to cling to life and feeling that he was letting his family down by getting worst.

We all know that one of the gifts of knowing Christ is eternal life with him, so let us not cling on to this life, but enjoy eternity, here and in heaven.