

15th Sunday (A)

13th July 2014

‘Assisted Dying: why not?’

Is 55: as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens ...

Rom 8: I think that what we suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory

Mt 13: 1–23: imagine a sower going out to sow ...

It’s nearly the summer break — I’ll be away by next Sunday, in Lourdes for the diocesan pilgrimage to Our Lady’s great shrine there. In a way, one might wish to embrace the summer with a lighter subject, something just relaxing and encouraging. But in fact that’s not possible today — not by my choice, but by the parliamentary timetable.

As I think you know, next Friday, 18th July, sees the debate in the House of Lords on a private member’s Bill to allow so-called ‘assisted dying,’ i.e. assisted suicide, or euthanasia, to be introduced into our country. Once again, therefore, we need to make our voice heard, to defend the weakest and most vulnerable in our society, against this threat posed by the Bill. None of us likes suffering. None of us likes to see acute suffering in our loved ones, and would, we feel, do anything to save them from the pain they are enduring. And yet, there are limits to that, God-given limits that arise from what the human being really is. For man is a spiritual being as well as a physical one, ... a

spiritual being with an immortal destiny, ... and with an immortal destiny which is bound up with how he behaves in this earthly life.

The question arises, of course, of suffering. Should suffering be eliminated at all costs? — this is the way people tend to think today: “is s/he in any pain at all?” ... or, “we wouldn’t even let a dog suffer like this.” It’s this thinking, of course, that creates the huge push to allow the premature killing of frail or terminally ill patients — or, in some cases, the non-terminally ill, who simply can’t face the suffering ahead. “We wouldn’t even let a dog suffer like this” ... No, but we also wouldn’t even let a dog go to heaven. The suffering of a dog is just the suffering of a dog — it has no meaning beyond its material self. It has no meaning for eternity. The suffering of a human person — whilst we do all humanly possible to relieve these symptoms and provide maximum comfort — is not meaningless. In fact, it can be packed full of meaning. In that sense, it is the role of anyone of faith who accompanies the sick and frail to unpack that meaning ...

to help make sense of suffering (even if in a limited way) ... and so bring some peace to the afflicted person. One will never have all the answers, but one can at least help the sick person to locate their suffering in the grander scheme of their faith and their eternal life.

To do the opposite, to eliminate the suffering by eliminating the person, flies in the face of who we are, and what we are here for, and what we are made to be and preparing to be. We may all experience times when we want to give up on that struggle, to not see it through, but the answer can never be their deliberately being killed ... Instead we must help those who are struggling with the sufferings of the end of life to bear them with dignity. Their pain can be relieved, but the better medicine is the practical love and presence of those who value their life, and their immortal life.

Many patients will come to new realisations as they contemplate the end of their life. For Catholics, the sacramental experience of the risen and eternal Christ in His love for them, is so powerful. A moment of incredible

beauty and peace is the reconciliation of a sick patient in Confession ... especially if that person has been estranged from Christ for many years. It can be a moment of incomparable peace. Alongside that, the regular reception of Holy Communion and the Anointing of the Sick, brings repeated comfort and grace: that in the condition the sick person is in, Christ is with them, the Holy Spirit is in them.

Even for non-Catholic, some experience of the spiritual, the presence of God who is all-compassionate, and who provides the gift of believers and ministers in this world, can bring comfort every day to the suffering. As someone approaches death, the medical interventions may grow fewer — the options open to the physician may dry up — and for some doctors it may seem like a failure, and a patient to silently or embarrassedly give up on ... But for someone who accompanies in love and faith that person who is dying, s/he remains precious and dignified, for they are always as valuable to God as ever they were the day they were conceived.

I want to give an example of a patient I attended on over many months back in 2004. She herself was a doctor, and

though not even 40, had an aggressive cancer. As 2004 wore on, she grew less and less responsive to the treatment she was receiving, and some time in October 2004 she was extremely low. Yet she was not at all at that time accepting of her condition, and quite hard to talk to. One day that month, when she was extremely ill, her brother came in and found her fluids had been stopped. He queried this. He didn't know quite what his own opinions of this attitude were, but was pretty sure that it wouldn't have been in the ethics of his own sister, and he was very diligent about her. "Why prolong the inevitable?" he was asked. But he was insistent — he was not going to sit back and accept the deliberate demise of his sister by removal of fluids. They were reinstated — she made a recovery. She went home to her flat for Christmas. Her family came from Malaysia, including her mother. They enjoyed their Christmas together. She took ill again in early January, and died in mid-January 2005. But, by then things were very different. In all sorts of understated, but noticeable ways, she was in a very different spiritual state when she died to when she was low, and had her fluids removed, three months earlier. She had reached a state of greater peace, and greater acceptance; and in like way, so had her family. She was not ready to die in the October, for all sorts

of reasons, both medically and particularly spiritually; those three months were crucial. They were irreplaceable. No medicine could replace the spiritual value of those three months with an earlier death by their own decision.

Personally, I only need this one example in my life, to know that it is the right thing. It spoke so profoundly to me, that our care of the spirit is paramount, and that our concerns for the alleviation of pain are secondary. Relieve the pain of the body, by all means, but if in the process you snuff out the options for the relief of the pain of the spirit — whether sins in need of forgiveness, or indeed the more all-encompassing acceptance of the will of God for one's life and death — where has that got you? You could be casting a person unprepared and far from peace prematurely to their death.

There are all sorts of other arguments [see the yellow sheets...] why we should not allow the killing of the sick through euthanasia or assisted suicide. At the end of the day it goes against the Fifth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Please act this week to inform Peers of your objection to seeing our country go down this route.