

## Is Death the best invention of life?

Text: 2 Corinthians 11: 24-28

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” St. Paul.

Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even though he dies.

A Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a rabbi were discussing what they would like people to say at their funeral when people filed by paying their respects.

Priest: I would like someone to say, “He was a righteous man, an honest man, and very generous.”

Minister: I would like someone to say, “He was very kind and fair.

Rabbi: I would want someone to say, “Look! He’s breathing!”

I was riding along on the open top of a double-decker bus on the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco. The earphones were droning on about the bridge and the fact that it is a common destination for those who want to commit suicide. As I looked down at the grey water so far below and contemplated what it would be like to commit suicide in this manner the earphones informed us about how everyone who had jumped except one had died. Apparently hitting the water from that height is like hitting a hard surface in

terms of impact. But, the earphones went on that there was one youth who jumped and survived, swam ashore and despite his injuries got himself to a hospital!

What must it have been like for him? Imagine overcoming the fear, making the decision to end one's life, experiencing being terrified as you jumped. Those brief seconds between the bridge and safety and then approaching certain death knowing there was no return; the impact, the descent below the water. At what point did the desire to live kick back in? Then the struggle to the surface, hurting all over, the swimming to the shore against the currents, dragging yourself out and then getting somehow to a hospital.

Perhaps if you are like me, something inside you felt sad when Steve Jobs the founder of Apple, died at the age of 56. The Foundation for Entrepreneurship said of him: "We remember with deep gratitude the profound contributions of Steve Jobs. The world is a much better place because of him." Speaking at Stanford for the graduation ceremony Jobs shared his cancer story and his views on mortality. He said:

"Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life... Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.... There is no reason not to follow your heart.

...And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now, the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true.

Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions

drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

When he said these words, he apparently believed that he was free from cancer. But it was to return.

How did knowing he was going to die soon, change his life? When the cancer returned full force after a liver transplant and major therapy, Steve focused on doing only what he wanted to do in the time he had left. He no longer traveled the world. Instead, he focused on his family and the things he wanted to do at home. He wanted to make the [iPad](#). He wanted to make an awesome television. "You're born alone, and you're going to die alone," he said. "What exactly is it you have to lose?"

He remained incredibly productive until the very end of his life.

Steve Jobs was a Zen Buddhist. Buddhists do not necessarily believe in an after-life. The point is to live life here and now, and make a strong contribution.

St Paul's view was in sharp contrast. For St Paul there was life after this life. And that is where the hope lay for St Paul, for this life. For him our troubles here are short lived because our eyes are fixed on the unseen which for him was eternal. He became convinced that nothing in this life or even in death could separate us from the love of God.

St. Paul let death help him live on the edge. He was immensely courageous. Every time he went into a synagogue, he could end up being stoned, put in jail or beaten. He was shipwrecked and managed to survive. Always he was on the edge. He never let the fear of death hold him back. He accepted danger as a reality and chose to live his life to the full. He had his eyes fixed on the life to come!

In a brilliant tribute to Steve Jobs written for the Wall Street Journal Andy Crouch asks whether it is possible to live a full,

human life without the hope of a life to come? He answers by saying that Steve Jobs would have said yes in a heartbeat because he felt that this life was all there is. He was not sure of the next life. Nevertheless, he said that one had to believe in something else as well.

Jobs said: “You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.”

Life for St Paul and Steve Jobs was a mortal gift- there was a dying in it. St Paul once said that he died every day meaning that every day there is a kind of death, some kind of letting go that portends what will come for us all.

But what is there in this mortal gift that is attractive, meaningful and makes life worth while. Where is the gift?

I was reading a historian the other day who was arguing that freedom comes in history through a series of crises or bumps in the road. Things grow to a head and then burst, and out of that bursting comes the new freedom. He cited the Arab Spring as an example of this. Entrenched forces dig in but eventually the castle of thought and the status quo is stormed and people are liberated.

Libya felt that it could not achieve its freedom until the reign of Kaddafi was over and his death for them did that. Saddam and Kaddafi and Mubarak have all had their day because time moves us all relentlessly onwards. Death does that as well. Death will end Putin and stop Trump and Biden. Its just when that remains as the question.

Without the possibility of death, the old would remain and the new would be denied. LIFE cannot have that. And so, each of us in our time, whether short or long lived, will be cleared away. As we age, we, like St Paul, die a little every day as we learn that life cannot be clutched. The slippage is always there and what to do with that slippage is one of the greatest and most meaningful challenges of the life Force.

But that is not the entire gift! Knowing that we will die can give life a kind of edge, an urgency, if you will, to seize the day. Friendships become more important and love more precious! Our mortality can inspire us towards greatness. We live short lives and our mortality can be our guide to beauty, to spending time with loved ones, to smelling the roses rather than putting things off and to the discovery that what is essential is invisible to the eye.

In fact, the universe, including our own death, is a conspiracy of love according to Alan Cohen: "...there is hope. The outcome is guaranteed: the conspiracy to love will succeed basically because God is playing on that team...Although the time of our surrender to love is up to us, the final scene is certain; we will realize that the universe is a manifestation of love, and we are in God's graceful keeping."

I think that Steve Jobs understood these things but on an intuitive level. Because he did not know for sure about a life to come, although he hoped that it was so, he put all he had into the life he lived and placed his hope and energy there. In doing so he made an incredible contribution to LIFE.

But there are those with whom we are surrounded who live lives of quiet desperation. Try as they might they cannot seem to find meaning. And like the boy who jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge, they jump and unlike him they are successful at taking their own lives. They have missed the gift in our mortality; they see mortality as release only...

The ancient philosopher Epicurus rejected immortality and mysticism. He believed that there was a soul but that it was as mortal as the body. For him there was no [afterlife](#), yet, one need not fear death, because "Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved, is without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us."

In other words there is an on and off switch to life. And after death it is off!

But most of the major religions teach that there is a life after this one. The Christian Church was founded on the belief in the resurrection: Jesus said: I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even though he dies.

There is medical evidence found in book after book on life after life research that shows that our souls survive death and go on. In one Gallop poll survey of 21 million people who had lost vital signs sometimes for up to 20 minutes, 8 million reported life after life experiences.

Such stats should lead us at least to agnosticism about the after life. If as Steve Jobs says, Death is our greatest teacher in this life helping us to distinguish what is important and what is not, then something else might very well be afoot. If this world is the place where we make our souls then death has to play a part in that soul making process. Death is how life renews itself and is the only way to a possible afterlife.

One little disabled little boy called Jeremy, who fell behind in his class of 19 other students due to developmental disabilities, was asked along with the other children to bring a symbol of new life and put it in a plastic egg and bring it to school. All 18 other children complied beautifully. One placed a flower “Because that is when we know that Spring is here” she said. Another placed a plastic butterfly saying that a caterpillar changes into a butterfly which is a sign of new life.

Another child placed a small rock with moss on it showing that the moss was a sign of new life.

Then came Jeremy’s egg. The teacher opened the egg to discover that it was empty. The teacher thought that Jeremy being somewhat slow had not understood her instructions and so she put the egg down and went on with other eggs exclaiming over them.

But suddenly Jeremy spoke up. “Aren’t you going to talk about my egg?”

The teacher looking flustered replied “But Jeremy – your egg is empty.”

Jeremy looking into her eyes with the trusting simplicity of a child, showed that he had an understanding of one of the greatest symbols of the Christian faith. He said simply “Yes but Jesus tomb was empty, too.”

There was a long silence. This was not a Sunday school.

The recess bell rang...and the children ran outside. The teacher, deeply moved, continued to sit in her chair.

Three months later little Jeremy died. And at the mortuary on top of his small coffin were carefully placed 19 eggs- all of them empty.

Steve Jobs understood the power of symbolism. Hence the apple with the bite out of it as a symbol going back to Adam and Eve and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. How appropriate is that as a symbol for the access to the Internet?

But near the end of his life, he left another a sign. He said this about the next life:

"Sometimes I believe in God, sometimes I don't. But ever since I got cancer, I find myself believing a bit more." Steve went on to explain that this increased faith was in part a hope that when he died, it wouldn't all just end, that there would be some sort of after-life. "...sometimes I think it's like an on-off switch," he continued. "It just turns off and you're done."

However he revealed his own symbol of hope of life going on.

He deliberately didn't put "off" switches on his Apple devices...