

Good Friday
Fr Jonathan Jong

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The most cited definition of a “good death” is from a 1997 report by the US Institute of Medicine, now called the National Academy of Medicine. According to them, a good death is “one that is free from avoidable distress and suffering, for patients, family, and caregivers; in general accord with the patients’ and families’ wishes; and reasonably consistent with clinical, cultural, and ethical standards”.

It is a broad definition, in the sense that it commits to nothing specific besides freedom from distress and suffering, which is hardly controversial. Fair enough, I suppose, given the combination of individualism and cultural pluralism that characterises our modern societies. It is unsurprising that a national institute of a diverse country is unable to say much more than that a good death is whatever

we want it to be, within certain unspecified constraints.

Looking at the social scientific research on the subject, we see further reason for this vagueness. The most common finding across studies is that people want pain-free deaths; beyond that, it's very difficult to generalise. People do want to die with dignity, but dying patients seem less concerned with this than those for whom death is not quite so imminent. People want to feel like they have lived a fulfilled life, but accounts of the good life are varied too. At least in the UK, people seem quite unconcerned about religious matters¹: but a recent systematic review of multiple studies found that family members and medical professional do *underestimate* the importance of religion and spirituality to the people under their care.²

¹ http://www.dyingmatters.org/sites/default/files/files/NCPublic%20polling%202016_Headline%20findings_1904.pdf

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4828197/#R9>

It is telling that the vast majority of the research and commentary about “the good death” comes from the healthcare sector as opposed to, say, the Ministry of Defence. But there is a venerable tradition of treating the battlefield as an important locus of good deaths. We still use militaristic metaphors in medicine—we talk about putting up fights against diseases, for example—but that’s not quite the same thing.

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The disciples tried to give Jesus a good *burial*, at least: dressed in cloth and spices, housed in a stone tomb. The alternative would likely have involved an unceremonious dumping into a mass grave, but not before the corpse was left on the cross to suffer the elements and the beasts.

But what they could not have given him was a good death, not even by our vague modern standards. And certainly not by ancient Jewish standards, for whom martyrdom did not yet feature in their concept of a noble death, except

perhaps on the battlefield.³ Of course, the *willingness* to face death for God's sake is praised in the Hebrew Bible: think of Daniel and his friends, for example. But these stories end with not with death but deliverance, and this vindication is the sign of God's favour.

Stories about pagan philosophers give us a little more to work with, and the early Church did indeed liken the death of Jesus to that of Socrates. But this will not quite do either. As their defiant final acts, the ancient philosophers assert their agency in the face of despotism. Socrates would rather take his own life than have it taken from him. Zeno and Anaxarchus⁴ bite their own tongues clean off, just to spit them out into the faces of tyrants. Jesus does none of these things. Instead, he weeps alone in a garden, weeps for the last minute rescue mission that never comes. Instead, he remains silent, and subjects himself to false accusation and to abuse unto death.

³ 1 Maccabees 6

⁴ Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Philosophers*, 9.

Sure: we say now that our Lord's silence came from a place of strength, because it is easier to retaliate than to keep cool. We say that Christ *allowed* the Romans to torture him, almost as a father would let a child win in some boisterous game. And we are, I think, right to say these things. But we do well to notice that they are very odd things to say. That they make sense to us at all is itself a sign of how the world changed on Good Friday, is changed by it.

Make no mistake: Jesus does not die a good death by any standard, old or new, except the one he creates for us anew. The death of Christ can only be good because it is *his* death, in whom God—and therefore goodness itself—in fullness dwells. And because it is his death, it is good precisely to the extent that it is, by any other reckoning, *bad*: the death of Christ is good because it is God's being with us in our worst experiences. More: it is God's being with us at our worst behaviour. The death of Jesus is both a sea of pain and humiliation as well as an effluence of betrayal, injustice, and cruelty. Even

here—at our worst—God joins us, whatever your pains and humiliations are, your betrayals and injustices and cruelties: and mine.

Divine solidarity with the suffering and the dying is nothing to sniff at, but there is more to be said about how it turns bad things into good things, turns the unjust public execution of an innocent man into Good Friday. Well, God joins us in our worst, but does not just leave us thus and there: God transforms it. Indeed, God *must* transform it. The death of Christ is good because in it goodness goes through hell, which it cannot help but harrow, from which it must, by definition, destroy. If hell is where there is no goodness, then it ceases to be hell the moment it receives goodness into its bowels. It is must be changed, contradicted out of existence and made new, filled with the power that brings forth everything from nothing.

This good death of Jesus is the source of Christian hope, which is the anti-thesis of self-protective cynicism. Our courage to imagine and strive for a better world, a better life, a better us

is predicated on this death which destroys death; is based on this good man whose goodness turns the inherent badness of death into the goodness of eternal life.

And of course it sounds like foolishness, sounds mad; and maybe it is all just wishful thinking in the end. But there is, in this case—like in so many truly important matters in life—only one way to find out, which is to show up and enter his tomb, so that our tombs become his too, our darkness and depression his, our sin and suffering his, our guilt his, our death his.

And maybe all will be better with Jesus, and maybe not: I don't know; this is not really what is promised in any case. But all will, we trust, be *good*. This might not mean very much in the thick darknesses of our lives; but it is not, I hope, *nothing*.

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