

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon :  
November 18, 2018 ~ “2nd Sunday before Advent ”

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November is something of a dark, solemn month. The clocks have moved so the nights are drawing in – and the church has been remembering All Saints and All Souls, as well as the recent commemorations for Remembrance Sunday. And now we begin the countdown to the start of Advent – which means the inevitable slide towards Christmas. Just to get you in the mood, there are just 35 shopping days to Christmas. But we are still in November, the month of remembering. For many of us as we remember those who have gone before us, we might also be reflecting on our own mortality. For Christians, death should have no fear as we try to hold onto the hope that a new life is promised to us after our earthly life comes to an end.

But the stark reality can be quite different. Most people hate to talk about death or joke about it in a way that dismisses it – and a lot of people really do fear death. This is hugely understandable for it is something over which we have almost no control. Indeed many don't so much fear death as fearing the manner in which we might die – and I'm afraid that there is no easy answer to that very natural human conundrum. I think my personal philosophy has always been to try to live each day as fully and as well as I can – and then leave the rest up to God. But I come back to my point – we cannot avoid death however much we think we might, a la Peter Pan, live for ever. It was the American Benjamin Franklin who wrote, 'there are two things in life that cannot be avoided – death and taxes'. Well I think that's only half right because we know that people can avoid paying taxes. Helpfully there's a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer which asks that 'we might be spared from dying unprepared'. So even though none of us knows when or where we will die, that shouldn't stop us carefully preparing the practical things that will surround our death – this is at least something over which we do have control.

So what can we do: well firstly I would strongly urge everyone to 'Write a Will' – and if we have one to make sure it is up-to-date. November is 'Will Aid month' when solicitors all over the UK will draw up a simple will in return for a suggested donation to charity. Sadly many people don't write a will which results in chaos for family or friends – and the only winners are those who work in the legal profession trying to sort out the mess that has been left.

As part of this we might want to include bequests to causes close to our heart; for example we might consider leaving a gift to the Church – this is why we have unashamedly prepared the yellow legacy leaflet for you to read and consider. Legacies to the church – or to any charity – are a good way for our name to live on and are enormously helpful to the charities we may have supported during our life. We hope you will find the leaflet of help too with a host of useful information.

Then secondly I always encourage people to plan their funeral service. This is not at all morbid – but will make life so much easier for family and friends when the time comes. Speaking personally, I was appalled at the cost of my Mother's funeral some 7 years ago – even allowing for the mate's rates that I managed to squeeze out of the funeral director! So I have pre-paid my funeral.

Finally I also think it is enormously helpful if our wishes for the actual service are put in writing. I have lost count the number of times people leave church and say 'I love that reading/hymn/prayer/piece of music – I want it at my funeral'. My reply is always 'so write it down and put it somewhere safe'. I have been party to so many family arguments about the funeral arrangements because relatives haven't got a clue what was wanted. For my part I am very happy to keep a confidential note of your funeral wishes and would promise that I and my successors will carry out your wishes when the time comes.

My apologies to those who you who feel I've just given you some extended notices this morning rather than preaching a proper sermon and also to those of you who feel uncomfortable about the subject. But I do think it is vital that, as we are able to plan so much when we are alive, so we should plan carefully for our end. Thus a bit of a challenge for us all this month – to take some time to ensure our affairs are in order. And once we have done all we can to prepare for our death, then we can get on with the task of living – and that sort of leads onto one new project which we are hoping to start here at Christ Church which Chris Larkman is going to speak about now...

*Chris Larkman then spoke about the Syrian refugee project and invited those interested in offering help to come along to a meeting in the Truman Room next Sunday, 25 November, after the 10am service.*