

Sermon preached by Canon Ray Nichols in St Mary's Church, Iffley

"Of course it's only the tip of the iceberg". What a good little saying that is. It conveys immediately what you mean. What you see or know is only a very small proportion of what really is. Of course, for it to convey its meaning, you have to know something about icebergs - not much - but enough to realise that the bit showing above the water - huge as it may appear - is only a tiny fragment of what lurks under the surface. I remember seeing one for the first time in the days when our wartime Atlantic convoys used to take a route so far north, to avoid German submarines, that we would find ourselves off Iceland and the coast of Greenland. An iceberg is an awesome sight, and the thought that you are looking up at a towering mass which is just the tip of an enormous whole is almost too much to take in. We have the same difficulty, but on an even greater scale, with the real meaning of Easter.

The first words you hear at a funeral, as the body is brought into the church, are "I am the Resurrection and the LIFE. He that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he LIVE" What does the word "LIFE" mean? Well, for us it is the opposite of death. It begins with conception and birth - though the exact moment of commencement is the subject of both medical and theological debate. When does life actually begin? It continues for a while - then it ends, though in some cases the exact moment of that is not always terribly certain. Doctors talk of being "brain dead" and "clinically dead". However, there comes a moment when it is clear that it is over - and LIFE - we say - is finished.

But the particular truth which the Church teaches at Eastertide is that we are talking about the tip of the iceberg, and whether the period of life which we have actually seen and experienced is what we would call "long" or "short", it is only a tiny part of the whole. It's all a matter of proportion. If you're parking your car in a crowded street, a few inches can make all the difference between parking safely and having a nasty dent in your rear end. But if you were running in the London Marathon, I don't imagine an inch here or there would be uppermost in your mind.

Like seeing an iceberg for the first time, you are bound to be preoccupied with the bit you can see, because on the surface it seems to be the whole thing. The same is true of our daily living. We are all busy attending to that bit of our existence we call life - the bit we're actually experiencing now. But what if that is only a minuscule part of the whole, of what Jesus called LIFE? - our total being, in the mind and purpose of God? Supposing we are so preoccupied with that tiny fragment of which we are aware, that we miss out entirely on the 99.9% which we can't actually see and experience now, but which Jesus promises us is there. "I am the Resurrection and the LIFE" he said. "He that believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live". "Don't mistake the small part you now experience for the whole thing, which has its source in Me and is eternal and indestructible".

That's why He was always teaching the disciples, by means of stories about people who spent their lives acquiring everything they could possibly get - only to find that they put all their efforts and energies into the tiny bit of their lives that they could see, and then discovered that the really significant proportion of their lives was still to come. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" "He that saves his life shall lose it". Don't gather all your treasures on earth (for the little bit of life here) and leave yourself bankrupt for the main part still to come. What you now see is only the tip of the iceberg. It's impressive, sometimes even beautiful, but it's only a tiny proportion of the whole - just the little bit that's showing.

So what is physical death, then? It is the water line on the iceberg. It is the line that separates what you can see from what you can't see - but it's only a line. It doesn't divide the whole. The iceberg below the water is the same iceberg as the one above - it is a continuous whole. Death is all a part of life and life is not broken or divided by it. It is simply the water line, marking the transition from the tiny fragment of our present experience to the much greater proportion of our being, created and sustained by Him who IS life.

Of course I've been using ordinary physical terms to convey the infinite. A millimetre on a tape measure 1000 kilometres long - helps to illustrate the proportion, but cannot adequately express "eternity". Nor indeed can even using words like that. Life after death isn't just longer - not even everlasting. What on earth would we do with ourselves all day? Human language won't do - and simply leads us to the error of putting God into our human environment and physical time scale. God does not look back

to the past, nor does He look forward to the future - those are concepts which belong to our human, physical world. As C.S.Lewis put it "He lives in an Eternal NOW - a moment that moves neither backwards or forwards. That is where we belong.

St Paul regarded physical death as such an unimportant moment that he said to the living Christians at Colosse - "You are already dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God".

Of course you've heard all this before. "What did he preach about?"
"Nothing new, same old thing."

What could be new is that you actually commit yourself to believing it. When Jesus said to Martha, outside her brother's tomb, "Your brother will rise again", Martha said "I know, that's not new, that's the same old thing". And when Jesus asked her "Do you believe that no-one who is alive and has faith in me will ever die?" She said "Yes, of course I do - I've heard it all before". Jesus said "Then take away the stone". So - many of us have heard it all before - year in, year out - same old thing, nothing new.

What could be new - this Easter, is that you actually believe it, make the leap of faith and take away the stone.