

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 30TH APRIL 2024

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Much of Christian spirituality can be seen as preparation for death. The term “euthanasia” means “good death”. The Church’s evening prayer includes the Nunc Dimittis, spoken by the elderly prophet Simeon after he had encountered the infant Christ in the temple: “Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.” That is surely the yearning that underlies all our anxieties about death – to depart this life in peace.

Yesterday’s debate by MPs about a petition on assisted dying was deeply thoughtful and responsible. Many used the language of personal freedom and choice, but I think the language of trust is just as important. Those in favour of assisted dying need to trust that medical authorities and relatives will act with absolute integrity: death won’t be hastened because of scarce funding and resources; dying individuals won’t feel pressurised to end their lives prematurely in order to ease the burden of care, or to help their families pay off the mortgage. The only consideration must be to spare the dying extreme pain and humiliation.

The petition focused on terminally ill people being able to end their lives. There are however justifiable fears that legalised assisted dying might be widened beyond cases of terminal illness, as is now the case in countries such as Belgium and Canada. Helping a despairing or highly dependent person to achieve some quality of life involves intense emotional and financial support. When societies are governed by profit and productivity, how do we ensure that death does not come to be seen as an efficient solution to the challenge of profound suffering? Improving palliative care was rightly a concern of many MPs taking part in yesterday’s discussion, whatever their views.

To oppose assisted dying also requires a level of trust, that those around us won’t extend our lives artificially beyond what is bearable. With modern medical technology, it’s possible to draw out the dying process far beyond natural

limits. Taking the decision to let a loved one die can be excruciating, and there may be an overwhelming temptation to keep them alive, whatever it takes and whatever the cost. We shouldn't confuse prolonging dying with prolonging life.

True freedom means learning to accept and even embrace mortality. The dread of death, its avoidance at all costs, can imprison us in fearful and restricted lives. For me, it's the ultimate act of trust: to hope that my departure from this life, whatever form it takes, will be a welcome into the eternal peace of divine love.