



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 26th March 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Numbers chapter 19:1-20:13

Death shall have no Dominion

Introduction: What is it about death?

Why do we find death such an alien and intrusive and unnatural fact of life? I spent the week before this in Addenbrookes Hospital as a guest of the National Health Service (NHS), and I came out last Saturday with a huge sense of gratitude for the NHS. The NHS was actually launched in the year of my birth, 1948, under the slogan—'SAFETY from the CRADLE to the GRAVE'. But thoughtful people asked then, and have asked ever since—“But what about after that?” What about after death?

Now, is it that uncertainty which creates such reluctance in human beings to face death?...such obsessive avoidance of the topic...such resentment...such fear...such a sense that it is an unnatural invader, that it should not be...such a sense of us being violated by death, as it brings all relationships to an end?

During my time in hospital, I listened to a consultant explain twice at great length to the patient in the next bed that he probably had only a few months to live. Later, in conversation with that patient, I asked if it would be a help to him to talk about dying? He said “No”—he had no time for that sort of thing, and probably, in a week or two, he would be laughing at all of this. I wish I had spent longer in the bed next to his, because he may have changed his mind.

But how does scientific atheism explain this ostrich-like evasion in human beings? You see, animals don't rage against the dying of the light when their days are done. It is only humans who refuse to go gentle into that good night, who find themselves, whenever death comes to them, so ill-prepared for it, so resentful of it, so reluctant to

face it. I think there is a reason for that, (as we'll see).

Well, our Bible passage this evening, makes it clear to us that this is no new phenomenon in human consciousness. 3,000 years ago the people of Israel were deeply aware of the defiling and contaminating nature of death, like an alien invader among them.

1) God's Grace over Death

Numbers 19

You see, death must have been a constant and pervasive feature of life in the Israelite camp in the wilderness. The entire generation, who had come out of Egypt, were to die there. But every single death was a very serious matter:

“Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean. Whoever touches the dead body of anyone and fails to purify himself defiles the LORD's tabernacle. That person must be cut off from Israel. Because the water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean; his uncleanness remains on him. This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days, and every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean. Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days” (19:11-16). The defilement was highly contagious—“***Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone***

who touches it becomes unclean till evening” (19:22). A single death could swiftly contaminate the whole camp.

Now, in a hot climate, a corpse decomposes very rapidly, and any unburied body was a serious health hazard. Moreover, paganism in those days (just as it does today) entertained all sorts of harmful notions about the power of the dead over the living, (whether it be ghost stories, séances/spiritualism, or trying to win the favour of our ancestors).

But for the Israelites, the most significant factor about death was that God was the giver of life. It was His will that man should live, and not die. It was man’s disobedience that forced death into human experience. And so every death told of how human sin had broken the relationship between God and humanity. Note, this is made clear in the final six words of verse 9: *“it is for purification from sin.”*

There had to be an appropriate way of handling death in the Israelite community, not just for health reasons, and to avoid occultism, but because it was the result of sin, of our disobedience. So God had provided this strange ceremony of the red heifer to deal with death among His people.

It is a strange ceremony, because it has a number of unique features in terms of Old Testament rituals: *The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: “This is a requirement of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke”* (19:1-2). Note this is a young cow, not a bull. That was contrary to normal sacrificial practice. *“Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence”* (v 3). ‘*in his presence*’, not by him: The priest is more of a witness here. And the slaughter takes place outside the camp, not on the altar: *“Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. While he watches, the heifer is to be burned—its hide, flesh, blood and offal”* (vv 4-5), nowhere else in the Old Testament is the blood burnt. *“The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer”* (v 6). This is like other sacrifices, and yet also quite unlike them: *“After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. The man who*

burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening” (vv 7-8). Everybody involved became defiled simply because they had participated: these purificatory rites seem to purify the defiled and defile the pure.

“A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They shall be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin. The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the aliens living among them” (vv 9-10). Uniquely, the ashes are preserved for later use. There is a sense of immediacy about other Old Testament sacrifices but here there is a long-term dimension to it. The use is described in verses 17-19: *“For the unclean person, put some ashes from the burned purification offering into a jar and pour fresh water over them. Then a man who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there. He must also sprinkle anyone who has touched a human bone or a grave or someone who has been killed or someone who has died a natural death. The man who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person on the third and seventh days, and on the seventh day he is to purify him. The person being cleansed must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and that evening he will be clean.”*

This is strange: *“For the unclean person, put some ashes from the burned purification offering into a jar and pour fresh water over them”* (v 17). We seem to have ‘instant sacrifice’ here, a bit like ‘Instant Mashed Potato’—put them into a jar, add fresh water, stir and hey presto! There you are. Mashed potato in an instant! Or, here, we have instant sacrifice, ready in just a moment to take away the consequences of sin, because another had died in the place of the sinner.

In its Old Testament context, this ceremony of the red heifer’s ashes was very strange; but, in the total Biblical context, it makes perfect sense. Look at the verses which began our service tonight: *The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ,*

who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:13-14). The red heifer is one of the Old Testament's many pictures of Jesus Christ.

Talking about the Christian believer's relationship with God, Paul wrote *This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, Who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* (2 Timothy 1:9-10). Paul wrote only a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus; but 20 centuries later we still have that gospel. It is like the ashes of the heifer: add the fresh water of faith and you have the answer to death. (sorry if that is a little fanciful and overly allegorical—but I hope the picture is clear).

The ashes of the heifer are a picture of the gospel, because Jesus Alone reverses the spiritual entropy of sin and death, the decay, the decomposition, the contamination, the defilement. He was the One who could touch the corpse and the unclean, and, instead of Him being defiled, they sprang to life and to wholeness. He Alone can do that. He Alone can give you and me hope and certainty on the face of death. *Who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* (2 Timothy 1:10). We need to ask ourselves, if we don't talk about death very much, is it because we do not really believe Jesus can do this?

Now, death pervades the next chapter as well (chapter 20). It begins with the death of Moses' sister, Miriam, and it will end with the death of his brother, Aaron. But the focus has shifted onto what I am calling—

2) God's Grace over Moses Numbers 20

God's grace over Moses, even though it is going to involve God's death sentence on him.

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarrelled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD 's community into this desert, that we and our

livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!" (20:1-5). It is sadly familiar. In fact, figs, grapevines and pomegranates were the very fruit that the spies had brought back (in chapter 13) from their trip to the Promised Land, which is just where all the people of Israel would now be, were it not for their disobedience. But the Israelites were far more concerned for their own immediate ease and comfort than for God's long-term will for them (and how often is that true of all of us).

There had been a very similar incident back in Exodus 17, at Rephidim, nearly 40 years before, so Moses and Aaron knew where to turn: *Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell face down, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."* So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him (20:6-9).

Now, the previous time at Rephidim, Moses had been told simply to strike the rock and not to say anything, which was what he did then. But here God gave different instructions, and Moses did not heed them: *The LORD said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."* So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. *He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them"* (vv 7-13).

Instead of merely speaking to the rock for it to pour water, Moses aggressively rebuked the people, and then struck the rock twice: *He and*

Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank (vv 10-11). I wonder if Moses had not listened that closely to God? Perhaps he had assumed he already knew what God was going to say?

That is a fatal mistake in our dealings with God. Do you find yourself as you open the Bible, assuming that you already know what it is going to say to you? We must never make that mistake with our Bible reading. Did we make it before this sermon? The Bible is the living voice of the true God and it is the nature of a conversation with a living person that you do not know what the other person will say next: What am I going to say next? “Rhinceros!” Our relationship with God must not become like a tired marriage, where over-familiarity means that husband and wife have stopped actually listening to each other. I rather liked a cartoon of a husband and a wife where the wife is saying: “I’m sorry, dear. I wasn’t listening. Could you repeat everything you’ve said since we’ve been married”? Thinking we already know what God is going to say to us will kill off our Bible reading as surely as anything else. Has it killed off yours? Start listening afresh for a living voice to surprise you.

God wished to act differently here. In a singular display of His mercy, and of the power of His bare word, He wanted the complaining mouths of the Israelites to be stopped by a flood of fresh, clear water, not by counter-accusations on the lips of Moses. But Moses thrust himself between the people and God: ***“Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?”***(v 11a). And God acted immediately to check him: ***But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them”*** (v 12). What a moment of bitter disappointment for Moses! Forty long years directed to this one end—the Promised Land—and now he would never enter it. Perhaps God knew that Moses was very close to stepping over a borderline here. In recent years here in Cambridge we have seen what can happen when an undoubtedly great Christian leader steps over such a line. If Moses thought he was above needing to listen closely to every word of God, God swiftly and mercifully corrected him.

But, of course, what was at stake here was not primarily the success or failure of Moses and Aaron. It was the holiness of God: ***“Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the LORD and where he showed himself holy among them*** (vv 12b-13). And God was not defeated by Moses’ failure. Do we feel it was a harsh judgement on Moses? No—because he was to make a far better entry into the Promised Land, in far better company. Do you remember when? We studied it when we were looking at Matthew 17 back in January... when Jesus was transfigured before His disciples, and Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Him. That was a far more glorious entry, wasn’t it?

But for that to happen, Moses had to die. He may have been distraught at the thought of dying before the people of Israel entered the Promised Land. But only by dying could he enter it in a far more glorious way in the company of his Saviour.

God is never defeated by death. And you and I (if we are believers) must not be: please think on your death, and prepare for it; and that of your loved ones—hold them before God on an open hand. I have been surprised at how unprepared we are in this fellowship. Death speaks to us of sin and separation, and so it is bound to fill us with dread. But we have the answer to that sin and separation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. So drive out the dread, and death will have no dominion.

If you are puzzled by this, please come to the Guest service next Sunday when we will see how our sins can be forgiven and bring with you those in fear of death.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)