Assisted Dying. Part 1. How should Christians make moral decisions?

Rev'd Dave Brown, Rector

Intro: The Complexity of Modern Life.

I suspect that we'd all agree that modern life is complex to a far greater degree than generations before. That's true when we're choosing what coffee to have, what film to watch on the endless different channels and streaming services available, or what Newton Abbot take-away to use for your birthday meal. It's also true when it comes to making moral choices.

I assume we'd all agree that cold-blooded murder is wrong. That adultery is wrong. That armed robbery is wrong. That perjury is wrong. Pretty much every society has had laws like those which isn't surprising given they derive from commandments numbers 6, 7, 8, and 9. As his children, God's law is written on human hearts (even if we don't always pay attention to it) and the 10 Commandments state that these things are clearly and always wrong.

But what about killing someone who has broken into your house and is threatening your children? What about if lying under oath would save many innocent lives? And what about the kind of moral decisions that the Bible does not mention by name: abortion, IVF treatment, experimentation on animals, or our topic tonight: assisted dying or assisted suicide? How do we make a clear and Christian moral choice in those issues?

When life throws up complex moral dilemmas there are a few different ways we can arrive at our decision. Or as I'd like to put it: several different planets on which to stand and make our decisions. Let me suggest 4 which are common today. Sometimes we might flit between them or even try to balance on more than one at once. But thinking about the basis for our decisions will help us understand where we are each coming from- or what planet we are on!

<u>4 Possible Planets for Moral Decisions- and their problems</u>

We could seek to stand on **PLANET POPULAR** and take our lead from the opinion polls. After all, that's how we choose our holidays! Don't we all look at Trip Advisor now? It's also how we decide the winners on reality TV shows, in elections and on big issues like Brexit.

But there is a major problem with this: The majority is not always right. Sometime the wrong person wins the public vote in a TV competition, and far more seriously, terrible dictators have sometimes been voted into office by huge numbers of their countrymen- even if they have quite open about their policies. However good it feels being in the majority and part of a large crowd moving in the same direction, we must remember that sometimes the majority view can be both wrong and wicked. Planet popular isn't always a safe place to be.

A linked planet to this is **PLANET EXPERT.** We spot someone who we trust and admire who holds a view we like, and we use that to justify our decision. I must be right- because so and so thinks so. Perhaps we quote their expertise or position in science, government or the church. There are plenty of times when this is a good thing to do- we trust doctors and electricians for good reason. But with moral dilemmas we always need to ask what planet they are standing on. Taking a person on trust simply because of their position is never a good idea. Today, many people take a different tack and stand on **PLANET PERSONAL**.

We feel it is our right to make our own choices and we resent anyone telling us what to think or how to behave. That's why personal stories have become such a powerful tool when it comes to discussing moral questions. We tell the story of our pain and demand an answer, a solution that brings us happiness. Or we know someone suffering with a particular issue and our heart of compassion goes out to them. We love them dearly and hate to see them suffer, so our response to say yes to whatever makes their life easier is a largely emotional one. We might find some experts to back up our position, but our decision is a purely personal one. We have decided what is right.

What's the problem with this? Two things: Firstly, it denies there can ever be any moral absolutes. If it is morally acceptable for us to make a decision based on our feelings and emotions, then it must also be morally acceptable for someone else to make the opposite decision based on their feelings and emotions. On planet personal there can be no critique of anyone's decisions if we're making them on planet personal. There, everyone has the right to decide for themselves and that leads to moral chaos.

And secondly, it completely overlooks our sinful natures. We will all know from painful experience that we can so easily make wrong choices. The Bible backs that up telling us that the heart- the seat of our desires and emotions – is deceitful above all things! Planet personal is a dangerous place on which to stand to make difficult moral decisions.

Some of us might balk at the idea of being led by our emotions or popularity and search for a rational approach. A person standing on **PLANET RATIONAL** aims to take a dispassionate look at all the evidence, or the thinking behind a clear, logical argument. The pros and cons are considered and the implications studied. The rational thinker seeks to be objective, excluding feelings and public opinion and religious dogma.

That all sounds great. Except, we never know all the evidence, do we. Our minds are limited so we can't foresee all the possible outcomes. And of course, this is God's world, so keeping God out of the debate is wrong on so many levels.

However, as Anglican Christians (in fact I'd say as Christians of any denomination background) we have something better than these three planets: A moral framework which gives us not just a sure place to plant our feet when we face difficult moral decisions but also a means and a method to deal with whatever new moral issues come along in our ever-changing world.

An Anglican Means to make it through the Moral Maze

If you've been an Anglican for any length of time you may well have heard of Bishop Richard Hooker. He was born in Exeter in 1554 which is why there's a statue of him in the grounds of Exeter Cathedral. Hooker's way of dealing with complex moral issues was 3-fold: using scripture- reason- and tradition. And whilst he didn't himself speak of a three-legged stool; many people have attached that idea to his thinking.

As with all things Anglican- the most important leg is **scripture**. Scripture is God's Word to us, a divine and reliable self-revelation of God to us that reveals his character and mighty acts, that tells us about ourselves and explains how we need to relate to our creator and how we, as God's creatures, should live in God's good world.

So in the scriptures we see that God is Holy and Just, and that he expects us, his creatures, to behave likewise. To help us live rightly, God has given us moral commandments to obey like the 10 commandments in Exodus 20. These are not suggestions, but commands to his people. And since none of these 10 commandments are repudiated in the New Testament, we can say confidently that these, along with other commands that find their place in both Testaments,

form a clear Christian moral framework for God's people – and all people - to follow.

But the scriptures also teach us truths that have a wider application: about the value of human life, the sovereignty of God over all things, the reality of eternity and an eternal judgment; and through narrative, wisdom literature and parables, they guide us in how these laws should be understood and applied. Because God is unchanging, we cannot say that we know better now, or that times have changed. God's laws are as unchanging as his character. If the Bible clearly teaches something we need to accept it, believe it and obey it.

We need to be honest though and say that some things are not clear cut. So, we need to use our wisdom and apply our intellects and reason to help us see our way through. Here is the second leg of the stool. This isn't an alternative route. As Christians we cannot simply jettison the Bible and think things through ourselves. No, Christian wisdom seeks to rightly apply what God's Word does say to situations which it may not directly address.

So let me give a silly example: The Bible doesn't mention piracy, so, was Blackbeard a criminal? Yes. Piracy involves murder and theft- and almost certainly plenty of sexual immorality too- all of which the Bible condemns as wrong. To misquote Shakespeare: a sin by any other name is still as wrong.

And where things aren't as clear cut, the Bible gives us principles which we can seek to apply rightly. So the great abolitionists used the principles of human dignity and value to argue against slavery. There may not have been a verse or command they could point to, but the fact that the Bible teaches that all human beings are made in the image of God; that all barriers of race and language are immaterial to salvation in Christ and have no bearing in the Church, gave them a strong moral basis for their work. They reasoned from Biblical truths to arrive at a clear Christian moral position- and they changed the world.

Scripture and reason are the first 2 legs. The third is tradition- and I'm speaking here of the accepted doctrine, practices and teachings of the worldwide church- not just the Church of England.

Once again, we cannot choose tradition on its own. As article 21 of the 39 articles tell us, the church as an institution can err, and its Bishops and clergy can also err. So just because something has been accepted practice in the

Anglican Church for decades or centuries doesn't give us a free pass to accept it without using our reason and most importantly, checking things against scripture. However, our forefathers in the faith often had a deeper understanding and appreciation of God's Word, and world and character than we do; and they wrestled far more deeply with issues than we might even consider. A quick look at how thick many of their treaties are compared to modern theological works gives evidence of that.

So when a clear moral teaching of the church has been established over time, we must be hugely cautious about thinking that we know better than they, without having thought things through very carefully it indeed. And whilst some of the issues we are wrestling with- like our topic tonight – might be a result of modern problem- which has arisen as a result of advances in medicine, the traditions and long-accepted teachings of the church on moral issues give us a strong basis for our thinking about the moral dilemmas that we face today.

So when Matthew starts setting out the Christian view of assisted dying, he will make his case from scripture, reason and using the traditions and teachings of the church across the ages on issues like this.

You may disagree, and there will be time to discuss and ask questions when he's finished. But if you do disagree, can I ask that you think about the basis on which you are disagreeing, and whether you are taking your stand from a very different planet.

That's to come. For now, have a chat on your tables about the idea of these different planets as bases for moral decisions. Does it make sense? Have I badly mischaracterised things? Are there other planets you think people might use? Are there benefits of some of these planets that I've underplayed? Or dangers that I've understated?

A few minutes to chat then we'll take some questions.

Part 2: A Christian Reflection on Assisted Dying: An Anglican Perspective

Father Matthew Cashmore

This evening we're reflecting on a deeply human question—one that attempts to grasp life, death, and our relationship with God.

As Christians, and particularly within the Anglican tradition, we seek to approach this with prayerful hearts, guided by Scripture, tradition, and reason. As David has already laid out, this is how we as Anglicans attempt to engage with any question of theology - and therefore, moral direction.

These three pillars help us navigate the complexities of life whilst remaining rooted in the love and truth of Christ.

We'll start with scripture and begin, where else? In Genesis. But before I do that I hope you'll notice as I walk through this talk whether I'm referring to tradition or reason, there are many references to scripture and if it would be helpful I can provide a list of all my references via email.

In Genesis 1:27 we're told that God has created us in His own image. This isn't just a poetic flourish—it's a profound statement about our worth. Every person, from the frailest newborn to the elderly nearing their final breath, bears the imprint of God.

Life, then, is sacred, a gift entrusted to us by God. The Psalms echo this: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). From conception to natural death, our existence is held in God's hands.

This sanctity of life has long shaped Christian thought and moral direction. In the Ten Commandments, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) stands as a clear boundary. Historically, Christians have understood this to mean that we don't have the authority to take life—our own or another's—because it belongs to God.

This starts to give us the 'tradition' element of our anglican theological exploration. So taking scripture and holding it against tradition we inevitably start with the Church Fathers.

We can go all the way back to the early Church Fathers, like Augustine, who argued that even in suffering, life remains a thing to be cherished, not a burden to be discarded.

For Anglicans, this reverence for life is reaffirmed in our liturgy (where we hold our doctrine), we pray for the sick, the suffering, and the dying, entrusting them to God's care. But we can go further back than even the creation of the Anglican communion!

Let's return to Augustine.

Augustine remains one of the most influential Church Fathers, and he provides the clearest early Christian stance against suicide, which extends to assisted forms. In *The City of God* (Book I, Chapters 17–27), he responds to the Roman practice of suicide as an honourable escape (e.g., women taking their lives to avoid rape during war).

He argues that life is a gift from God, and to end it—even in extreme circumstances—usurps God's prerogative. He cites the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13), interpreting it to include self-murder. He writes:

"It is not without significance that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering into a better life or of escaping any evils."

For Augustine, suffering doesn't justify ending life, it is instead an opportunity for patience and trust in God. If we apply this to assisted suicide, his logic suggests that aiding someone to die—however compassionate the intent—still violates the divine order, as it involves human hands in an act reserved for God.

We can go even further back, let's pick up Tertullian who was writing between the 2nd and 3rd centuries. He emphasised the sanctity of the body and life as God's creation. In *On the Soul* (Chapter 56), he critiques pagan attitudes toward death, asserting that Christians must endure suffering rather than flee it through suicide.

He saw life as a stewardship, not a possession to discard. Tertullian's focus on martyrdom is telling: he praised Christians who faced death at the hands of persecutors but never endorsed self-inflicted death, even under duress. His writings imply a rejection of any act—assisted or not—that prematurely ends life, rooting this in the belief that God alone determines our span (Job 14:5).

Can we push even further back? Yes, we can! Let's go back to the start of the 2nd century AD and the writing of Clement of Alexandria.

Clement was a teacher in the early Church, he addressed suicide albeit indirectly through his ethical teachings. In The Instructor (Paedagogus), he stresses that Christians should live according to God's will, enduring life's trials with faith. He

contrasts Christian patience with Stoic acceptance of suicide, arguing that taking one's life reflects despair, not virtue.

Clement writes:
"To flee from life is to flee from God, who is the giver of life."

While he doesn't explicitly mention assistance in dying, his framework leaves little room for it. Aiding someone to "flee from God" would be seen as complicity in sin, undermining the call to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) through care, not termination.

Why am I spending so much time on 'tradition' and the early church fathers? Well, their context was remarkably similar to our own today.

The Church Fathers wrote in a Greco-Roman world where suicide was often culturally accepted—whether as Stoic self-mastery, a noble exit (e.g., Seneca), or a means to avoid dishonour.

Against this, they asserted a countercultural ethic: life's value isn't contingent on comfort, honour, or utility but on its origin in God.

They saw suffering as part of the human condition, redeemable through Christ's own suffering (1 Peter 2:21). This didn't mean they ignored pain—they advocated care for the sick—but they rejected hastening death as a solution.

They also lacked the modern context of terminal illness and advanced medical technology, which complicates assisted dying debates today.
Yet their principles remain relevant: life's sanctity, God's sovereignty, and the call to perseverance. For instance, Jerome (c. 347–420), in his letters, praises those who endure illness bravely, suggesting that assisting someone to die might rob them of a final act of faithfulness.

From the Fathers' perspective, and from the perspective of every major theological since, assisted suicide is seen as morally unacceptable. It involves intentional cooperation in ending a life, which they'd view as a grave sin—both for the person dying and the one assisting.

Their focus on God's authority over death (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:39, "I kill and I make alive") leaves no space for humans to assume that role, even out of mercy. Instead, they'd urge compassionate care, prayer, and trust in God's timing,

echoing Job's resilience: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10).

We live in a world of pain. Assisted dying arises from a cry of pain we can't ignore, the cry of those who suffer horribly, who feel their dignity is stripped away by illness or disability.

As Christians, we're not deaf to that cry now or throughout our history. Anglican theology calls us to compassion, modelled on Jesus Himself — who as we hear in the funeral liturgy, wept at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:35).

The Book of Common Prayer urges us to "comfort and relieve" those in need. So, how do we balance this compassion with the belief that life is sacred?

How do we take this heavy load of scripture and tradition which cry out against the sin of assisted suicide and start to apply it to the world around us using reason?

As in so much of life, the answer is to turn to the Cross. Jesus' suffering wasn't meaningless—it was redemptive. In His agony, He entered fully into human pain, showing us that even in our darkest moments, God is present.

For Christians, suffering can be a mystery we don't fully understand, but it's not *outside* God's love. St. Paul tells us, "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4). As we move towards the start of Lent we are called to consider our Characters in the light of the Cross of Jesus Christ. We are called to the difficult, the painful, and the complex nature of simply living in this fallen world.

This isn't to glorify pain and suffering, but to point us toward its transformation in Christ.

Assisted dying cuts short that process, choosing individual control over trust in God's timing.

But let's be honest: not everyone finds the Christian position on assisted dying satisfying or helpful. Modern medicine can prolong life in ways the biblical writers never imagined, sometimes extending suffering beyond what seems bearable.

Advocates for assisted dying often speak of dignity—preserving a person's autonomy to choose when and how they die.

As Anglicans, we value reason, and we can see the logic here: if someone is terminally ill, in unrelenting pain, shouldn't they have that choice?

Indeed that is the argument of those Christians who support assisted dying - amongst them an ex-Archbishop of Canterbury and a chaplain to the House of Commons.

George Cary and Rosie Harper both argue that - in George Cary's words,

"It is profoundly Christian to do all we can to ensure nobody suffers against their wishes"

Or in Rosie Harpers words,

"I support Falconer's bill really out of the depths of my faith. I think it comes down to what sort of God you believe in. I believe in a God who is compassionate and who essentially offers us free will."

Both of these statements fly in the face of both scripture and what Christians have embraced for over 2000 years. That somehow, if we believe in God, He will remove our pain - and if He isn't powerful enough to do this, then we must do it ourselves.

It is a philosophy which finds it's home in the early Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics were ejected from the Church in the early 2nd century because they believed - amongst other things - that our individual nature was what made us divine. That it was not God who saved us, but our own natures.

Interestingly this form of thought re-emerged in the enlightenment where we start to understand ourselves as fully formed and complete - think Descartes, 'cogito, ergo sum' - 'I think therefore I am'. We are all that we need to be and only need God as some sort of external guide, rather than as our creator who knit us together in our mothers wombs and teaches us all that we need through scripture and through interrogating that scripture across 2000 years as a body of people - as a church.

This idea that a compassionate God who would not allow us to suffer pain is a faith that is shallow and lacks any sort of intelligent reason.

And on a personal note, I find it difficult to take moral guidance from a man who has had his office taken from him and is currently undergoing disciplinary action for failing to act when he was aware of the most awful abuse of young men and women in the church by people he was personally responsible for.

He, and Rosie Harper do not speak from a place of reason or indeed of dignity, but of fear.

Dignity, in Christian terms, isn't tied to independence or comfort—it's rooted in our identity as God's children. The frail, the dependent, the dying—they don't lose their worth because they can't control their circumstances, they are not somehow lesser Christians because God has not removed their suffering.

Jesus Himself surrendered control, saying, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42) when he was faced with unimaginable suffering.

For Anglicans, this surrender shapes our moral life. The Church of England, in its statements over the years, has consistently opposed legalising assisted dying - just as the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches have, arguing that it risks undermining the vulnerable—those who might feel pressured to end their lives out of despair or a sense of being a burden.

Just think of the many statements by the Bishop of London - not just a senior bishop in the Church of England but the ex head nurse of the United Kingdom.

As I move into my final arguments I think it's important to bring together scripture, tradition, our reason and our logic, and apply them with practical concern: our call to care.

If we allow assisted dying, what message does it send to the sick and elderly? Could it shift our focus away from improving palliative care—pain relief, emotional support, spiritual comfort—and toward a quicker, cheaper exit?

Jesus commands us to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:39), and in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that love means stopping, tending, and lifting up the wounded. The hospice movement, deeply influenced by Christian principles, shows us what this looks like: a commitment to walk with people through their

final days, easing their pain while honouring their life. Gareth will pick up this theme in more detail.

I know this topic divides us. Some of us have watched a loved one suffer and wondered why they couldn't choose a peaceful end —indeed, as a nurse and now as a Priest I have sat with hundreds of people, holding their hand, as they have breathed their last breath of this life and see the desire to find assisted dying to be a mercy.

But we must fear a society where death becomes a solution to pain.

As Christians we don't shy away from these tensions. As members of the Church of England we've always been proud to say that our theology and doctrine is a broad tent, encouraging wrestling with hard questions.

But at our core, we're bound by the belief that God is the author of life and death. Job, in his anguish, cried out, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). That trust isn't easy, but it's foundational.

So where does this leave us? As Christians, we're called to uphold life's sanctity while pouring out compassion. Assisted dying might promise relief, but it raises risks—of eroding trust, of devaluing the weak, of stepping into a role reserved for God —stepping into a role that has an *absolute* consequence that we can't take back.

We should instead advocate for better care, for communities that surround the dying with love, and for a faith that sees beyond suffering to the hope of resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminds us that death is not the end: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This isn't a simple issue, and we won't all agree. But let's hold it before God in prayer. Let's ask for wisdom to care for the hurting, courage to defend the vulnerable, and grace to trust in His purposes, not our own.

Let's walk this path together, as a Church, reflecting Christ's love in life and in death.

Part 3: Facing Death with Confidence: A Christian Perspective on Palliative Care

Rev'd Gareth Ragan

Introduction Death is a certainty for all of us, yet it remains one of the most avoided topics in society. As Christians, we have a unique and powerful hope that transforms how we approach death. However, cultural attitudes, including euphemisms and fears, often prevent us from speaking openly and honestly about it. This presentation aims to equip us with the confidence to face death biblically, to speak about it truthfully, and to stand against the growing push for assisted suicide in the UK.

1. The Importance of Palliative Care Palliative care seeks to provide comfort and dignity in the final stages of life. As Christians, we affirm that every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and life has value even in its final moments. High-quality palliative care ensures that no one needs to suffer unnecessarily or feel that their life is a burden. The church has historically been at the forefront of compassionate care, and we should continue to support and advocate for effective end-of-life care that honours both the person and their Creator.

- Palliative care has its roots in Christian hospice traditions, with modern hospice care pioneered by Dame Cicely Saunders in the UK in the 1960s.
    - •A year later, she began working at St Joseph's Hospice, a Catholic establishment in Hackney, East London, where she would remain for seven years, researching pain control. There she met a second Pole, Antoni Michniewicz, a patient with whom she fell in love. His death, in 1960, coincided with the death of Saunders's father in 1961, and another friend, and put her into what she later called a state of "pathological grieving".[8] But she had already decided to set up her own hospice, serving cancer patients, and said that Michniewicz's death had shown her that "as the body becomes weaker, so the spirit becomes stronger".
- It is primarily funded in the UK through a combination of NHS funding mostly hospital (34%), charitable donations, and voluntary contributions.
- Despite its importance, palliative care services often face financial challenges, leading to disparities in access and availability across different regions.

2. Speaking Honestly: The Problem with Euphemisms To begin, let's take a moment to gather some of the common euphemisms we hear about death. What phrases do people use instead of saying "died"? (Encourage responses and note them down.)

One of the barriers to facing death with confidence is the language we use. Society often employs euphemisms such as "passed away," "gone to a better place," or "lost." These phrases can obscure the reality of death and make it harder to engage with grief properly. The Bible speaks plainly about death, and so should we. Using clear language—"he died" or "she has gone to be with the Lord"—helps us process loss truthfully and prepares us to face our own mortality with faith. The Bible does not shy away from the reality of death. From Genesis to Revelation, we see that death is a consequence of sin (Romans 6:23), yet it is not the end for those who trust in Christ. Jesus' resurrection gives us assurance that death has been defeated (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). As Christians, we do not grieve as those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13), but we recognise death as a transition into the presence of God (Philippians 1:21-23).

3. Facing Death with Confidence How then should we, as Christians, face death?

- With hope, knowing that Christ has conquered death. (John 11:25-26 – "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.")
- With truth, refusing to hide behind euphemisms. (Ecclesiastes 3:2 – "A time to be born and a time to die…")
- With compassion, supporting good palliative care. (Matthew 25:40 – "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.")
- With conviction, resisting the culture of assisted suicide. (Deuteronomy 30:19 – "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.")
- With peace, trusting that "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21 – "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.")

Conclusion The Bible verse Psalm 139:16 says, "all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be". This verse refers to God's knowledge of our lives, including when we will die.

The Bible also says that God has set limits on how long we will live, and that we cannot exceed these limits. This is stated in Job 14:5, which says, "Our days are fixed, the number of our months with you, you set a statute and we can't exceed it".

However, the Bible also says that we don't know the exact time of our death. This is because only God knows this information.
The Bible also says that we should not presume to live longer than God wills for us to live. James 4:13-16 says, "You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live' and do this or that"'

By reclaiming a biblical understanding of death, speaking truthfully, and promoting palliative care, we can help shape a culture that honours life to the very end. Let us, as Christians, be a voice of hope in a society that fears death. In Christ, we have the ultimate assurance that death is not the end but the doorway to eternal life.