

## Euthanasia

May I begin with an apology. In researching this delicate subject I have read widely and sought expert opinions. In some cases I have plagiarised those expert opinions. I have been especially impressed by the authors of the **book “Always to care, never to kill”**, by the writings of Mary Wurster and the legally based opinions of Peter Murcott, a member of our congregation. I hope I may be forgiven for relying heavily upon their words, so much better than my own. I start with a quote from ***Mary Wurster writing on the internet.***

“There are three primary arguments in favour of euthanasia and Physician assisted suicide (PAS):

**Autonomy** – the right of the individual to choose.

**Minimizing pain and suffering** – The wish to take away the suffering of terminally ill individuals extending perhaps to the belief that there is an obligation to do so.

**The conviction that there is no morally relevant difference between taking steps to hasten death and allowing the dying process to occur.**

Whereas the concept of a physician intentionally ending the life of a patient was considered unthinkable for centuries, western sentiment seems to be changing. In fact, euthanasia is sometimes referred to as death with dignity.”

**Let us be clear Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide (PAS) refer to deliberate action taken with the intention of ending a life, in order to relieve persistent suffering.**

Euthanasia has been legal in Belgium since 2002. Thousands of individuals in this country alone are euthanized each year. Countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and others are perfect examples of how opening the door to voluntary euthanasia leads directly to the practice of non-voluntary euthanasia, which is the killing of sick individuals who are incapable of consent, and even involuntary euthanasia, which is the killing of sick individuals against their will. These practices have become the norm in a society which considers that certain lives are not worth living. It is ironic that whereas many Dutch people vigorously opposed Hitler's form of euthanasia during the War - sometimes at the cost of their own lives - today's Dutchmen and women are acquiescent about it on a significant scale.

**The danger of the slippery slope.**

Germany's highest Court The Federal Constitutional Court has recently recognised suicide as a **constitutional right**. I quote “The right to self-determined death is not limited to situations defined by external causes like serious or incurable illness, nor does it only apply

in certain stages of life or illness. Rather this right is guaranteed in all stages of a person's existence." End quote.

Until 2001, the Netherlands allowed only adults access to euthanasia or PAS. However, from that date children aged 12–16 years could be euthanized if consent is provided by their parents. The law even allows physicians to proceed with euthanasia if there is disagreement between the parents. In 2006, legislators in Belgium announced their intention to change the law to include infants, teenagers, and people with dementia or Alzheimer disease. In Holland there is no mechanism for refusing death to teenagers suffering depression and personality disorders.

In countries that have not yet gone this far the evidence is that the laws and safeguards **which have been retained** are regularly ignored and that transgressions are not prosecuted. For example, about nine hundred people annually are administered lethal substances without having given explicit consent, and in one jurisdiction, almost 50% of cases of euthanasia are not reported. All this is an example of the "slippery slope," Although the initial intent was to limit euthanasia and assisted suicide **to a last-resort option for a very small number of terminally ill people**, terminal illness is no longer a prerequisite. In the Netherlands, euthanasia is available for anyone over the age of seventy who is "tired of living".

### **Will the slippery slope into death become steeper?**

**Will euthanasia and PAS suffer the same freeing of regulation that we have already seen in the case of abortion law.** Beginning with a legitimate concern for mothers who were the victims of rape or whose mental stability might be threatened or impaired in any way, the law on abortion has gradually been liberalised. **Society was promised that this was a small-scale act of legislative and moral compassion which would be carefully monitored and strictly controlled.** But important safeguards have since been removed e.g. the signature of two doctors was required; the mother's physical or mental health had to be seriously endangered. Nine million deaths later, it is much closer to becoming **abortion on demand**. The Isle of Man **Abortion Reform Act 2019** permits **social** factors to influence the extension of the timing of termination of an unborn child. But it is not made clear if this will be an objective judgement by a physician or a merely subjective judgement by the parents. **If similar restraints are removed when Tynwald debates reform of Euthanasia it requires little imagination to see the possibility that social or even financial factors could become relevant to a family's case for the euthanasia of their elders.**

### **The Dilemma facing the medical profession.**

For centuries, physicians have adhered to the Hippocratic Oath. One of the clauses included in the historic commitment is this: "I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect." Those who subscribe to the oath promise

to refrain from participating in euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. In some countries, for example Canada, doctors who decline to hasten death are obliged by law to refer their patients seeking PAS to a physician who **is** prepared to provide euthanasia. Peter Murcott, who I have consulted in preparing this sermon, makes the point that that such a legal obligation makes the referring doctor an accessory before the fact and in law may be held criminally liable to the same extent. So a Canadian doctor is faced with an unenviable choice – to break his Hippocratic Oath or to break the nation’s law. Moreover it is increasingly the case that doctors and medical staff cannot get employment in medicine if they have such reservations

**Euthanasia has its secular opponents but they have been subdued in their public opposition..** The authors of a much-respected book “Always to care, never to kill” conclude that although it may sometimes appear to be an act of compassion, **killing is never a means of caring;**

Recent European history is clear, that if a nation changes the law in a way that undermines the sanctity of human life, the consequences are likely to be ghastly. **The Church should be at the forefront of passionate opposition. But was it?**

**What does the Bible have to say about Euthanasia.?**

The Bible opens by posing a profound question, to humanity. The tree in the garden of Eden introduces us to the burden of recognising good and evil. It should cause a society bent on thrusting back the ethical barriers to pause before it unleashes unforeseen consequences.

The classic case of Euthanasia in the Bible is in 2 Samuel 1 vv 6-9 which we read in our first lesson. If you recall, out of compassion an Amalekite despatches the mortally injured Saul, still alive after a failed attempt at suicide. As we heard David ordered the Amalekite who performed the act of euthanasia to be killed on the spot The Bible speaks very directly against the taking of human life, declaring the taking of **innocent** life to be **murder**. We read in our Gospel this morning from Matthew 5 v 17-26 “you shall not murder” . The prohibition against the taking the life of legally innocent people is also formalised in the sixth commandment, ‘You shall not murder’ (Exodus 20:13 ; Deuteronomy 5:17) . There is an important distinction here. The Hebrew word for ‘murder’ is **ratzah** – **“You shall not murder.”** The Hebrew word **harag** is killing in certain specified situations including in a just war. There is no ambiguity between the two words, (see Kings 21:16; Psalms 106:37,38; Jeremiah 19:4). Incidentally it is this difference which enabled me as a committed Christian to serve in and to command a tank regiment and a battlegroup, committed to killing an enemy when no other way of stopping their attack remained.

Finally in our search for guidance in the Bible we must recognise that there **is no provision for compassionate killing, even at the person’s request** and there is no recognition of a ‘right to die’ since all human life belongs to God (Psalms 24:1). Our lives are not actually our

own. Human beings are unique amongst God's creatures in being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

### **Another way**

There is another way which the Lord has inspired to ease terminal pain and despair.. It is a way that calls us to give our whole selves to the love and service of others by expending our time, money and energy in finding compassionate solutions to human suffering (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 8:34; Philippians 2:4-11; Galatians 6:2, 10). This way has found practical shape in the **hospice movement** and in good palliative care – pioneered in large part by Christian doctors and nurses. When a person's physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs are met adequately we find that requests for euthanasia are in fact very rare.

### **A Final thought**

For those who do not know God, euthanasia is most certainly not a 'merciful release' at all. You may recall that we discussed this in my sermon "Where do our souls go when we die?" It may rather be propelling their soul towards a destination of torment (Luke 16 vv 19--31 ) for which they are unprepared. It may be the worst thing we could ever do for them. (Revelation 20:15) . Better by far to bring them to a saving faith before they die.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible is clear. We are warned against intentionally taking an innocent person's life even if they request it. Instead we are shown a better way, offering hope, love and compassionate care.

Readings:

OT. 2 Samuel chapter 1 vv 1 – 16

NT. Romans chapter 5 vv 1- 11

Gospel. Matthew chapter 5 vv 17-26