END OF LIFE DECISIONS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Christ Church Georgetown January 22, 2017 Barry Jay Seltser

OUTLINE FOR TODAY

- Some Basic Starting Points
- Christian Views of Death
- The Sacredness of Life
- Some Distinctions and Principles
- Jesus as Model
- Summary
- Questions and Comments

OPENING REFLECTION

 "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

--Woody Allen

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STARTING POINTS

- We will die, and at uncertain times
- We may fear both death and the process of dying
- Dying today is uniquely medicalized
- Death as "unimaginable" and "unknown"

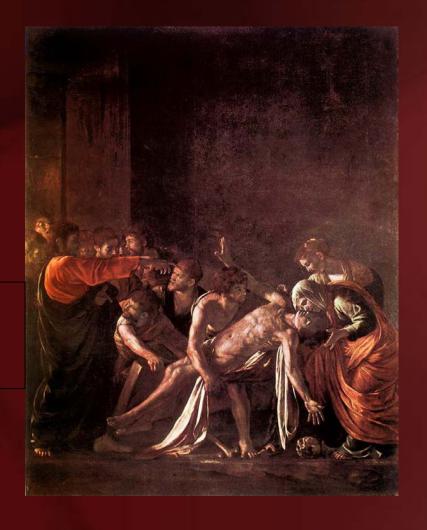


CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF DEATH

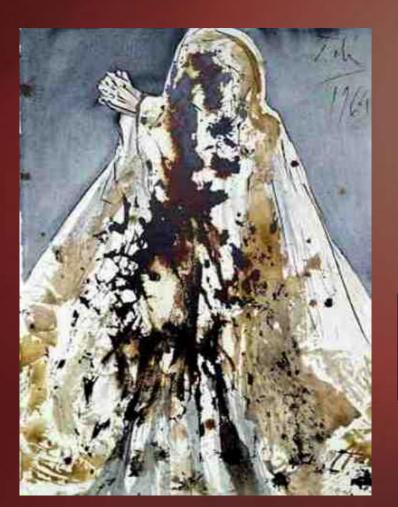
- The interpretation of Genesis 3
- Death as a positive release
- Death as the enemy
- Death and resurrection



DEATH IN LIFE, LIFE IN DEATH



Caravaggio, "Raising of Lazarus"



Dali, "Lazarus, Come Forth"

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WHAT DOES "LIFE IS SACRED" MEAN?

- Life has infinite and absolute value
- Life is a gift from God
- Life is given to us to protect as stewards

OUR LIFE IS NOT OUR OWN

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." --I Corinthians 6:19-20

SOME DISTINCTIONS

- Decisions about my life or someone else's life
- Killing or letting die
- Killing intentionally or as an unintended consequence
- Withholding or withdrawing treatment

JESUS AS MODEL FOR HOW TO DIE

Reasons to be cautious about this model:

- I am not Jesus
- Jesus dies in the prime of his life
- Jesus dies a death of horrible humiliating torture



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JESUS AS MODEL FOR HOW TO DIE

What we might learn from the model:

- Courage to risk death and willingness to sacrifice the self
- Faithfulness to the God who gives and redeems life
- Honesty about pain and despair
- Humility that we don't have complete control

PATIENCE, ACCEPTANCE, HOPE

"This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, "A Morning Prayer in Time of Sickness" (p. 461)

DEATH AS CONSISTENT WITH LIFE

Jesus' passion and Jesus' life

 If we are fortunate, does the way we die confirm the way we lived?



WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH?

- Religious beliefs are unlikely to provide clear answers
- Christian ethics insists on a strong "bias" for life
- Christianity provides a narrative enabling both lament and hope
- Death seen within the context of the hope of eventual "bodily resurrection"



FINAL REFLECTION

 "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going."

--Ecclesiastes 9:10

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS



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KEY PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER

- Compassion/care for the weak and helpless
- Autonomy
- Social justice—equality and distribution of resources