

WORKSHOP CONTENT

Welcome

Suggested text for introducing the workshop:

We're surrounded by images of death and dying in the media and the Christian tradition has at its centre the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ and the meanings that his friends and disciples have brought to those events down the centuries. Yet people rarely have opportunity to come together to reflect on their own living and dying and on the fact that every one of us will have to do our own dying at some point. Although this workshop offers some resources and stories of the meanings that writers and artists have brought to the ultimate question of what death and life means, it's meant to be an opportunity for you to reflect on what it means for yourself – and that might be very different from what it means to others past and present.

This is an opportunity to ask yourself some of the questions that the fact of our mortality poses to each one of us: what do I really believe? What does death and dying mean for how I live my life or want to live my life? What really matters, in the end? Of course, it may be that, as for many if not most of us, there are a lot of things you don't know, questions that have no immediate answers and that just have to be lived.

The workshop is designed to provide you with resources that we hope may help and inspire you in this reflective process but the important thing is to listen to yourself – not to who you think you should be, but to who you authentically are, maybe with many doubts, fears and anxieties – and to accept where you are with things as the only place to be.

It may be that for you, the workshop will be an exploration and that it is only as you start to do something, to make a mark on a piece of paper or choose a colour, that you can begin to know the truth of things for yourself.

The important thing to know is that anything you express in whatever way is valuable and will be valued as unique to you; it is not about being 'good' at anything. It is also important to know that confidentiality will be taken seriously; everyone's confidence will be honoured and we will treat each other and the contributions we make with respect.

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Any creative work that people produce will be treated with the same respect and degree of confidentiality as anything that is spoken or written. You are welcome to take your work home with you. If you don't want to do that, we will destroy it once the workshop has finished. We won't share it with anyone without asking your permission.

The structure is simple: After a short introduction we will listen to a song. This will be followed by time for reflection and discussion about what you have encountered before a short break. After the break, we'll have time to engage in some creative work before we share our responses together.

Reflection

You can begin the reflection with words like these:

The Christian tradition teaches that in his life, death and resurrection Jesus inaugurated 'the end times'. This is a phrase usually associated with the eschaton – the time when the current age ends, and the new age begins, and the values of earth give way to the values of heaven. Yet, in our busy, daily lives it is not easy to keep sight of this; most of the time, it feels as though the days, weeks and months will just keep on rolling by. However, as death comes closer through illness, loss, tragedy or the ageing process, we all enter our own 'end times'; we approach the threshold of eternity and this may focus our minds and hearts on the question of how to live well in this period of our lives.

All the great spiritual and religious traditions recognise the importance of paying attention to the fact that we are mortal and will die. St. Benedict, for example, advised his monks to keep death always before their eyes. Why? What is to be gained by keeping in mind our own mortality?

Deep inside each one of us, there is a place where we know we will die. Paradoxically, it is this awareness that binds us to every other human being and pushes us not to be content with living on the surface of things and people but to enter the heart and depth of them. When we encounter death or loss, either our own or that of a loved one, we are presented with the essential questions:

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- Who am I?
- What is my life for?
- Have I loved well?
- Have I truly lived/am I truly living the life that I have been given?
- What is my legacy to this life?
- What do I really believe?
- What do I hope for at death and beyond?

These are big questions and life is so full for most of us that we rarely take time to stop and reflect on them in any depth.

Introduce and read the poem

When Death Comes: Mary Oliver

(*When Death Comes* can be found in *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press. There are also versions of it on the internet.)

Follow with a short silence for reflection

Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth century bishop, wrote in his book *Holy Dying* (1651) that, 'Dying is an art, and to be learned by men (sic) in health.' But how do we learn to die? Taking time today to think about death and dying and to let these kinds of questions question us is part of that learning. Becoming more deeply aware of our own mortality can enable us to find new richness and meaning in our lives, perhaps a re-ordering of our priorities, a deeper realisation of what really matters – and it is not usually the possession of material goods! Moreover, reflecting on our own living and dying brings us up against who we really are before God, beyond the self we usually project into the world.

So, we consciously encounter the great paradox that reflecting on our own mortality calls us back to focus on what it means for us to be fully alive. As St Irenaeus said in the second century, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

This workshop is an opportunity for us to respond to the awareness we hold together that we are 'living in the end times' and to use that as an opportunity to explore how to live well, how to be fully alive.

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We can do that by asking ourselves some simple but profound questions:

- Looking back what do I think my legacy will be? What have been the significant events, relationships and encounters that have made my story meaning-full? What do I need to let go of from the past and what do I need to cherish and hold on to? What would I like my legacy to be?
- What makes life precious, delicious and fruitful now?
- What do I hope for at death and beyond?

Introduce and play the song

For a Dancer: Jackson Brown

One man's reflection on the meaning of life in the light of the death of a loved one. (A version of this song is available on YouTube).

Follow with a short silence for reflection

Silence

We'll now have a time of silence, to pause and reflect on your responses at this point. *This gives people time to reflect and to feel their own responses to what they have encountered.*

Discussion

Invite the participants to talk to each other. It can be done either in pairs or as a group. It gives an opportunity to discuss what has been encountered and what it has evoked.

Refreshment break

Give people the opportunity to carry on talking over tea and coffee.

Creative engagement

Invite participants to take part in one of several creative activities that are set out on different tables in the space.

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- Creating wisdom legacy cards. Write on a card something learned through life that a person would like to pass on to others, their own wisdom legacy or something from scripture that is important to them.
- Collage. Use the materials to create a picture of your feelings about life and death.
- Art. Draw or paint a picture in response to what you have heard.
- Reflection cards. Offer a set of reflection cards (you can buy these from <https://store.oxford.anglican.org/products/deathlife-cards>).

Sharing

Invite the participants to share with the group some of their creative expressions and reflections.

Drawing the threads together

Articulate the main questions, themes, insight and concerns that have been voiced.

Prayer

End with a prayer, if appropriate.