

Publishing Editor's column

DESPITE AN impending general election in Britain, media headlines during the week prior to writing these words have been full of the images of two dying people (both now dead): Pope John Paul II and a forty-one-year-old American woman by the name of Terri Schiavo. John Paul II was always in the news, and will long be remembered; Terry Schiavo came into prominence from nowhere because of particular circumstances and will soon be forgotten by the media which made her a *cause célèbre*. The two are linked by more than the fact that they lay dying at approximately the same time, however, for it was indirectly because of the pope that her case became so prominent.

John Paul II was in some ways a radical pope, for example, in the way he visited other countries, appeared before vast crowds and talked openly with world leaders. In other ways he was a very conservative pope, refusing to compromise in respect of traditional church teaching and practice. This was certainly so in issues to do with what is often termed 'the sanctity of life': birth control, abortion, euthanasia, embryo research and so on. In this he was frequently at odds with current thinking. It is here that Terri Schiavo comes into the picture.

Terri Schiavo, having suffered irreversible brain damage, had been kept alive but unconscious in hospital for many years by means of feeding tubes. Her husband wanted these removed to allow her to die naturally, claiming that is what she would have wished; her parents wanted her kept alive. After a legal and political battle extending over many years, and reaching the highest levels, she was eventually allowed to die. Before this happened there was enormous controversy. Her parents are Roman Catholics, and the widespread opposition to allowing Mrs Schiavo to die came mostly from Roman Catholics and right-wing evangelical Christians.

Most of these 'sanctity of life' issues arise from modern developments in science and medicine. People can be kept alive but with a quality of life which is poor, or even nonexistent, as with Mrs Schiavo. This leads to dilemmas involving court cases, bitter family disputes and high-profile media cases. Whilst the deliberate termination of life cannot be justified from Scripture, it is harder to apply Scriptural principles to how far

to go in maintaining life by the means now available to the medical profession. One thing is clear; there is only so much that modern medicine can do to maintain life, and for ourselves, and our loved ones who share our faith in the resurrection to come, the sleep of death is surely better than the meaningless prolongation of life beyond any prospect of recovery.

Returning to the deceased pope, he has been presented as a great example of endurance of suffering and dying serenely. Be that as it may, to the Bible believer he can only be regarded as the head of a colossal system of religious deceit. Though we are in no position to know for sure, his bearing suggests that he believed in it himself, and it will be for God to decide whether he will be brought to life to be confronted with the reality.

With the hope that we have, we above all people should be able to endure suffering and face up to death, but this does not make it easy, and capabilities in that direction vary from person to person. Moreover, others without our hope endure suffering courageously and die serenely, and it is not this that saves, but belief in the gospel.

If we want a good example of how to face up to death, it is to the Apostle Paul that we look rather than the late pontiff who took his name. When towards the end of his life he was under house arrest in Rome, he said that for him "to live is Christ, and to die is gain". He had no desire to cling onto this life, "having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better", but was ready to continue in the service of his brethren and sisters: "nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1: 21-24).

Then, several years later, when it was clear that the end of his life was near, he said, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). May we so live that we too may receive that "crown of righteousness".

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