

# IS SUICIDE A SIN?

## Paul Beasley-Murray

Scarcely a month goes by without somebody asking this question in one form or another. This article is the notes of a sermon preached in my church on this subject.

### **Suicide - a major problem**

The World Health Organization estimates that worldwide approximately one million people die from suicide every year, with one person dying from suicide every forty seconds. In the last forty-five years, suicide rates have increased by 60% worldwide. Suicide worldwide is now among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 (both genders).

In 2000, the Office of National Statistics conducted a survey and discovered that around one in six adults in Great Britain aged 16-74 have at some time in their life considered suicide. In the past year, approximately 4% (1 in 25) had thought about suicide, and one in 200 had thought about it in the past week.

Men are at more risk than women. Young men especially are more at risk, with the highest rate occurring within the age range 25-34. Higher rates are seen among the divorced, widowed or single and among the unemployed, although some jobs also bring higher risks (for example, doctor, lawyer, farmer or bar owner).

Although not everybody who commits suicide may be mentally ill, the vast majority of those who commit suicide are mentally ill in one way or another. A study of one hundred consecutive suicides found that 93 of them were diagnosed as mentally ill and 80 were receiving treatment for mental illness. In particular, suicide is often related to depression - life seems so dark that there seems no other way out.

### **Suicide - the Bible's view**

What does the Bible have to say about suicide? Very little! The actual word 'suicide' is not to be found in any Bible concordance, for the simple reason that it was only coined in 1651 by Walter Charlton. The act of suicide is mentioned five or perhaps six times in the Bible.

- Abimelech died at the hand of his armour-bearer rather than suffer the indignity of dying at the hand of a woman. The woman had thrown a millstone down on his head and fractured his skull, so in his case suicide was a hastening of inevitable death (Judges 9.54).
- Saul threw himself on his own sword after being defeated at the hands of the Philistines. He had been severely wounded and if he had not killed himself, then almost certainly the Philistines would have done so, and probably would not have been too nice about the killing either (1 Sam 31.4)
- Ahithopel hanged himself after Absalom had rejected his advice, but the context suggests that, if he had not hanged himself, then David would have killed him (2 Sam 17.23).
- King Zimri set his palace alight and died in the flames, but this was only after the city had fallen and with the forces of Omri after his blood (1 Kings 16.18).
- Sometimes Samson's death is described as suicide (Judges 16.28-30), but it was a suicide which involved the killing of others. His death was not dissimilar to the suicide-bombers of today. It does not fall into the normal category of suicide.
- The biblical suicide which has the most 'modern' feel is the only suicide found in the New Testament, namely the death of Judas. Realising the enormity of what he had done in betraying Jesus, Judas "hanged himself" (Matt 27.5).

Nowhere is suicide condemned in the Bible, but in almost every instance the subject of the suicide is a bad person, so perhaps the implication is that suicide is wrong.

Although the Bible has very little to say about suicide, it does have something to say about the sacredness of human life. This in turn has implications for suicide:

1. The key text is found in Gen 1.26: "Then God said, 'And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all the animals....". There we discover that, although created on the same day as the animals, human beings are more than naked apes - there is something extra special about them. Fish may be caught, birds may be trapped, animals may be hunted, but human beings, made 'in the image of God', may not be killed willy-nilly.

Furthermore, precisely because we have been made in the image of God, we humans are stewards of God's creation. In this role we are accountable to God, not just for the way in which we treat others, but also for the way in which we treat ourselves.

2. The Biblical view is that, just as God alone gives life, so God alone ends life. This understanding of life is found in Job's reaction when he is told that all of his children had died: "The Lord gave and now he has taken away. May his name be praised" (Job 1.21). Even in his grief, Job acknowledges the sovereignty of God: it is God who creates, it is God who destroys.

3. Another key text is found in Ps 24.1: "The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his". The implication is that we have no rights over our lives. Our lives belong to God, and it is up to him when our lives come to an end. A New Testament echo of this text is found in 1 Cor 3.19b-20a: "You do not belong to yourselves, but to God; he bought you for a price". If we belong to God and we hold our lives in trust, then clearly suicide is wrong.

### **Suicide - a Christian view**

The early church adopted the Jewish understanding of the sacredness of life and took over its negative view of suicide. This view came to expression in the writings of Augustine who equated suicide with murder. Indeed, he said that it was worse than murder, for in killing another human being one was killing only the body, whereas in suicide one was killing both the body and the soul. A murderer might at least have an opportunity to repent and save his soul, but a person committing suicide had no opportunity to repent, and therefore lost his soul.

As a result of such teaching people committing suicide were regarded as the worst of sinners - totally outside the scope of God and his love. They were treated severely and harshly. Suicides could not be buried in church graveyards. Instead (like Nonconformists and Roman Catholics) they were buried in unconsecrated ground. Their bodies were treated with little respect. For example, in 1823 a man who had committed suicide was buried at a crossroads in Chelsea with a stake pounded through his heart.

Today, thank God, the climate is very different. People who commit suicide receive a good deal of sympathy and

understanding. So what position should we as Christians take today? Here are my personal conclusions.

**1. Suicide is always wrong.** As Christians we believe that life comes to us as a gift from God. We are not free to return the gift whenever we feel like it. The ending of life is God's prerogative, and not ours. For a person to seek to end his or her life is to take the place of God. Suicide, whatever the circumstances, can never be justified. I am conscious that in today's liberal and permissive society, to talk in this way is not popular. We live in a society where everybody is deemed to have a right to do whatever they wish. But nobody has a right to take life, even their own. People may be free to commit suicide, but that does not make it right to do so. In saying suicide is wrong, I am not wishing to appear hard and unsympathetic. There may be 'mitigating circumstances' - just as there may be when an abused wife kills her husband - but, whatever the circumstances, the taking of life is wrong.

**2. Suicide does not end suffering** - it normally creates yet more suffering. Suicide is a very selfish act, for it does untold damage to others. As one relative put it: "He didn't just take his own life; he took part of ours too". Or as another said: "Suicide doesn't end pain. It only lays it on the broken shoulders of the survivors".

**3. Suicide is not an unforgivable sin.** There is no unforgivable sin apart from the sin against the Holy Spirit, which in effect is a refusal to acknowledge that Jesus is God's Son. Few, if any, when they commit suicide, are seeking to defy God. Rather than shaking their fists in God's face, many are looking into their own faces and hating what they see. Suicide may be a sin, but it is no more serious than any other sin. When Jesus died, he not only died for the sins of us all, but for all of our sins - "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin". True, the person committing suicide has not normally the opportunity to repent of their sin. But many of us commit sins that we are all too blind to recognise for what they are. We all die with sins not named and repented of.

**4. Suicide of itself therefore cannot debar a Christian from God's heaven.** Paul's words in Rom 8.38,39 remind us that: "I am convinced that neither death nor life.... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Christians whose loved one has committed suicide should not worry about his or her eternal fate. Jesus surely will

welcome home such a loved one with special warmth and tenderness.

**5. Suicide is not the answer to life's problems** - the grace of God is. Such is the vulnerability of our minds and our bodies that even the strongest of Christians can become victims of suicidal despair. However, we need to remember that the grace of God is always sufficient, and that God's power is made perfect in weakness. God has not promised us a trouble-free life, but he has promised that he will not test us further than we are able to bear, and that we are able to bear considerably more than we care to think.

**6. No situation, however desperate it may appear to a person contemplating suicide, is hopeless.** For God is with us, and wherever God is, there is hope. Hope has been defined as "The lived belief that with God no situation is the end of the story" (Wroe, Reith & Parkes: *The Church English Dictionary*). True, we live in a world all too often characterised by pain and sorrow - "We know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth" (Rom 8.22) - but as the metaphor of child-birth reminds us, there is a new world coming - a world where there will be "no more grief or crying or pain" (Rev 21.4). In the meantime we need to hold on to the fact that "in all things God works for good with those who love him" (Rom 8.28).

## CLONING JESUS

### Andrew George

In the Cathedral of Oviedo in Northern Spain, there is a cloth (the *Sudarium*) that contains blood stains that are said to have got there when the cloth was used to cover and clean the face of Jesus after the crucifixion. The blood has been typed (AB). There are other relics of Jesus, including the Turin Shroud, that might contain some samples of his blood. Most bizarrely, there were in the Middle Ages more than a dozen examples of Jesus' foreskin recovered following his circumcision. One of these was venerated in Italy as late as until it was stolen in the 1980s.