

Euthanasia

Ben had made some hard decisions in his life, but he had never been faced with one as hard or as drastic as this. It was literally, a matter of life or death.

Ben came from a small family, just him and his parents. When he was fourteen his dad had left home and gone off with a woman that Ben didn't know. Ben had never got on particularly well with his dad and they had drifted apart and eventually lost contact with each other. So from the age of fourteen it had just been Ben and his mum and they were very close.

Ben got a good job in London when he left school. He'd been excited about leaving home, but he knew that his mum was dreading being left alone. He visited her as much as he could, but his life got busier and he'd only seen her a few times a year recently, although he phoned a lot.

Now, he regretted the fact that he hadn't seen much of her.

A few weeks ago his mum had started to complain of stomach pains, but said they weren't bad enough to bother the doctor with. Recently though they had started to get much worse.

"I bet it's a stomach ulcer" she had said to Ben on the phone.

Ben told her to go to the doctor before they got any worse.

Two days later he got a phone call at work. It was his mum. He heard what she was saying, but somehow the words didn't sink in. He felt numb. His mum had cancer. He told himself that it just wasn't possible, that there must be some mistake. Things like that only happened to other people.

Ben left the office straight away and took the train back to Cheshire where his mum lived. People on the train were chatting and laughing, but Ben hardly heard them. He just kept on going over the conversation he'd had with his mum. In fact, he was so deep in thought that he nearly missed his station. He got a taxi to his mum's house. As it drew up outside the front door, it suddenly occurred to

Ben that he had absolutely no idea what to say to her. What did you say to a person who had just discovered that she had cancer? Ben took a deep breath and entered the house. He knew that he had to try and be strong and supportive, after all it wasn't all bad, he knew for a fact that some types of cancer could be cured. He found his mum sat in an armchair watching the TV, which she switched off as soon as he came in. She made him a cup of tea.

"I waited to tell you when you got here Ben, not over the phone. There's nothing they can do. It's spread too far."

Ben could hardly bring himself to ask the question to which he desperately needed an answer to. How long had she got left? He wanted to ask her, but he couldn't. He felt as though asking the question would almost be like sentencing her to death himself. His mum however, seemed to sense his difficulty.

"They've given me two months," she said.

Ben was shocked: his mum looked tired, but not ill.

"Are you sure they haven't made a mistake, mum? Have you had a second opinion?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It's no good Ben, there's nothing they can do."

Over the past month Ben had watched his mum's health rapidly deteriorate. At the end of that month she went into hospital. As the days went on, Ben saw her having to endure more and more pain. The doctors put her on stronger painkillers, but after a while those seemed to lose effect too and there came a point when the doctors seemed to be able to do nothing more to ease her pain.

Ben felt angry. Why his mum? She was a good person and she believed in God. Why had God let this happen to her? There were plenty of bad people that this could have happened to, it just wasn't fair! Sometimes he felt that he could not go through another visit. It broke his heart to see her in so much pain. She couldn't do anything or take pleasure in anything anymore. He knew the one thing that she did enjoy were his visits, because she liked having him there, but they didn't talk much now, she was too weak. He just held her hand.

One day however, he went to see her and she looked different. For one thing, instead of being content to simply sit and hold his hand,

she seemed determined to talk to him. It took her a while to get going, but when she started to speak she seemed suddenly to get stronger, as though she had to get through what she wanted to say at all costs. When at last she finished, Ben was left in a complete daze. He couldn't do it. She was asking the impossible! He could *not* kill his own mother.

It was true that he hated to see her suffering and that sometimes he had almost wished her dead so that she would be out of pain. But actually to kill her himself...

He tried to put the idea out of his mind, but it kept coming back. At times he was almost tempted. His mum was in agony, he wouldn't think it right to keep a dog alive in those conditions. Didn't he owe it to her to help her? But on the other hand could he really kill his own mother? Ben shrank from the idea, he knew how much his mum had done for him and he really did love her. He hated the idea of her suffering so much when he could put an end to it, but could he do it? *Should* he do it? Ben spent a long, sleepless night making his decision. At last he felt he knew what he should do. He put on his coat and walked slowly to the hospital. He went up to the ward and was about to go in when a nurse stopped him. She took him into one of the small interview rooms.

"I'm sorry Mr Collins, we've just been trying to phone you. Your mother died about quarter of an hour ago."

Euthanasia

The word 'euthanasia' means 'a gentle death'. In practice euthanasia means that a doctor treating someone who has a terminal disease (who maybe wishes to die sooner than would happen naturally) could administer a drug to bring about their death.

If your pet was in constant pain, or dying from a terminal disease, the vet would say that the kindest thing to do would be to 'put it down'. People who agree with euthanasia say that the same thing should apply to humans: people who are suffering should have the choice as to whether or not they go on living. Euthanasia is really assisted suicide.



1) Look at the arguments for and against euthanasia. Think of other arguments and add them to the lists. Decide which argument you think is the strongest on each side and explain why.

Arguments for euthanasia

It allows people to die with dignity, without excessive suffering and while their quality of life is still good.

If it was made legal, people could decide how they wanted to die *before* something happened to them.

Families do not have to stand by, helpless, and watch their loved ones suffering.

Everyone has the right to control their own life and their own body.

Arguments against euthanasia

It is playing God. Only God should determine when a person dies.

Life is sacred, holy and special. It should be treated with respect because it comes from God.

Euthanasia could be abused and used to kill vulnerable people against their wishes.

Medical science is coming up with new cures every day.

It is treating a person as a 'thing' which can be easily disposed of.

Some people experience miracle cures.

The medical profession should focus on pain control and improving facilities for the care of the dying.

2) If you were Ben, explain what you think you would have done and why?

3) Some people think that if euthanasia was legalised, it would be abused. The following types of people might be at risk. For each one explain what the risk might be.

(i) Old people who feel that they are a burden to family and carers

(ii) Wealthy people

(iii) People with a severe, but not life threatening disability who depend on carers to look after them.

4) (a) Imagine you have a terminal illness and want to die before you suffer excessive pain. Write a letter to an 'agony aunt' describing your situation. Then write their reply.

Or, (b) Write a letter to an 'agony aunt' imagining that you are the sister or brother of someone who wants to die, but you think that euthanasia is wrong. Then write the agony aunt's reply.

A Christian Perspective on Euthanasia

Most Christians are opposed to euthanasia. It is not a subject which the Bible specifically deals with, so Christians have to look at the general principles found there and apply them to euthanasia. A clear principle in the Bible is that all life is sacred, i.e., it comes from God and only he should take it away.

Christians also believe that God has a plan for every day of an individual's life; euthanasia would stop this plan from being fulfilled. The Bible also teaches that life after death with God (in heaven) will make up for the suffering we have endured on earth (Matthew 5:12 and 2 Corinthians 4:17).



Things to talk about

- 1) Look at the following situations and work out the arguments for and against allowing euthanasia in each case.
 - (i) Mabel is 87. She is in the last stages of a terminal illness. Her husband is dead and her son lives abroad.
 - (ii) Sally is in her 20s, she has special needs. She needs constant care and will never be able to live independently.
 - (iii) Zoe is 30. She is paralysed from the neck down, following an accident a year ago.

- (iv) Marie is a frail elderly lady living with her son and daughter-in-law and their 3 children in their small town house.
- (v) Josh is a teenager who has been in a coma for three years.

2) At the moment euthanasia is not legal in the UK. What do you think the punishment should be (if any), for someone who helps a friend or relative to die?

3) Under what medical conditions do you think euthanasia should be allowed if it were to become legal?

4) Explain, in your own words, what most Christians believe about euthanasia.

5) Do you agree with this Christian view? Explain why/why not.

6) Imagine that people are trying to pass a law to make euthanasia legal and that you are a Christian.

(a) Write a letter to your MP explaining why you think he should vote against legalising euthanasia.

Or, (b) Design a campaign poster to encourage people to protest against euthanasia.

7) If euthanasia were to be legalised in the UK there would have to be strict legal conditions on its use. What do you think these should be? Think about the illnesses/situations where it might be considered. Who would give permission for it to happen? Who would perform it? How could people be protected from being killed against their will?