



*File photo showing a medical personnel attending to a patient. — AFP Photo*

AT some stage in our life, we would have questioned our mere mortality and given the current circumstances under the coronavirus, it must be more often these days as we learn of the fatalities among friends and family members near and far.

There are two verses from the Bible that have always haunted my waking moments whenever the subject matter of death is either pondered upon or being brought up for discussion.

The first is from Revelation 21:4, which goes like this: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

But I must admit that my favourite is still this verse, which is sung as a hymn at most funeral services in churches around the world, and it comes from 1 Corinthians 15: 54-55: “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

I have just personally passed the Biblical saying in Psalm 90, verse 10 which says: “The days of our years are three score and ten.”

This is 70 years in a human's life. But then again, in Genesis 6:3, it has also spoken of a longer life span of 120 years: "The Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years."

According to Malaysia's Department of Statistics, the life's expectancy of a newborn baby boy in 2020 is 72.6 years, as compared to 77.6 for a female – a difference of five years! These figures have been increasing every year.

In the 1950s as a very young boy born into a very large family – in my own immediate family, there were five of us plus mum and dad; I had nine uncles and four aunties on my father's side, and four uncles and four aunties on my mother's side. I could never keep count of the number of cousins that I had at any stage of my growing years – only that whenever there were festive occasions being celebrated at both family homesteads, we had to take turns having our meals!

At that early stage in my life, the idea of someone who was aged 40 years was considered to be 'old'. Indeed, I had a cousin who at 40, was already a grandfather!

The mandatory retirement age then was 55. It was only in 2013 that the Malaysian government had increased it to 60. In those days, admittedly the life expectancy was rather low as well, in the mid-60s. The advancement of modern healthcare and many other new discoveries, including cures for common diseases and much lower infant mortality rates, has ensured larger populations who are living longer lives.

Those of us who had started work and begun pursuing our various careers in the 1970s and 1980s in hindsight were the lucky ones. The working population was still small, there was work to be found, anyone coming out either from a Cambridge A levels and its equivalent could get a job with ease; university graduates only started returning in some numbers after the 1980s.

The civil service was still the country's No 1 employer and once entrenched in it, you had a cradle-to-grave lifelong career, with a pension to boot.

Not many people were keen to go into their own businesses and there were few opportunities in the private sector in those days. We could witness the early beginnings of the brain-drain as many of our qualified talents started to migrate overseas in growing numbers in search of greener pastures. By the 1990s and 2000s, it had become a deluge.

Once upon a time in the 1950s and 1960s, where healthcare was concerned, there were only the government hospitals, clinics and a handful of private doctors, mainly GPs (general practitioners). It was only in 1988 that the first private hospital was opened in Kuching, and a few more followed many years later.

Similarly, the government's specialists centre and the Sarawak Heart Centre had followed soon after. Prior to all this, any treatment that needed specialist's attention – those more complicated than the run-of-the-mill diagnosis, had to be referred to Kuala Lumpur, and for those who could afford it, the nearest other city was Singapore.

Sooner or later, each of us would have to come face to face with our mortality.

A very small number would meet 'Our Maker' by an accident – the statistics are high for road fatalities and domestic mishaps – when death comes unexpectedly without any warning, leaving our loved ones totally unprepared and shattered.

Then there will be those of us who have been afflicted with incurable ailments – cancer, or the 'Big C', being the most common these days; some will live longer than others, and in the interim other lives will be affected, family fortunes are depleted and relatives find themselves broken up.

The statistics for Covid-19 from Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) as at July 1, 2021, showed that in Sarawak, we had recorded 413 deaths and 65,395 cases since March 2020. The total figures for Malaysia are 5,170 deaths and 752,000 cases.

Covid-19 and death by coronavirus in our country is something that we could have controlled better and done a lot more to lessen its deadly results so far. We still have to buck up on the vaccination of all our citizens to ensure that each and every one is protected at the fastest pace possible: it seems to me that both the will and the spirit of the powers that be are not really there at all.

I speak about the entire country as a whole; but am pleased to see and do applaud the many advances that our own state Sarawak have made so far – as at June 30, 2021, we have vaccinated (Dose 1) 1,070,727, which is 38 per cent of the population of Sarawak.

This is the second highest in Malaysia after Kuala Lumpur.

Well done to SDMC!

In reality, our mortality rate in the state is probably one of the lowest – I don't have the actual statistics to prove it, but judging by the number of obituaries and the news by word of mouth of those who leave this earthly plain due to a ripe old age.

These past few months, I have known of family, friends and former work colleagues who had passed on at between the ages of 82 and 96. Both figures are definitely many more years than the 'three score and ten' that the Bible had so noted.

At the end of the day, when one reaches life's edge to eternity (as a practising Christian, I know that there's a Heaven waiting for me) and according to your own faith — what makes a life?

To have lived a good life, to have loved and shared and to have been a decent human being, I conclude with a quote from Ecclesiastes 5:18: "Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot."

Amen.

<https://www.theborneopost.com/2021/07/03/knockin-on-heavens-door-facing-my-mortality/>