One of the factors which shapes the worship of this and every Christian church is the acknowledgment that we fall short of who we should be and what we should do. This is most obviously reflected in the confession we said together near the start of this service: ‘God of mercy, we acknowledge that we are all sinners. We turn from the wrong that we have thought and said and done, and are mindful of all that we have failed to do...’ But the underlying assumption pops up throughout the service... ‘O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us’, for example.

Which brings us to our first reading, where we heard how ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death’. All in all, the Christian Faith takes a pretty dim view of human nature. Sin and death are realities from which we need to be set free. Our natural state is one of subjection to the principle of sin and of death.

Lord Falconer’s Assisted Dying Bill will be debated in the House of Lords this coming Friday. The purpose of the Bill is to make it legal for doctors to supply lethal drugs to terminally ill patients who request them in order to take their own lives, as long as they are thought to meet certain criteria – that they have a settled wish to end their lives, that they have the mental capacity to make the decision and that they are not being coerced or put under pressure to do so.

Working out what to think about issues like this is never easy – especially when, as revealed in yesterday’s papers, we find archbishops on different sides of the argument!

Writing in The Times, the present Archbishop of Canterbury expressed his opposition to the Bill. He makes “a plea that the deep personal demands of one situation do not blind us to the wider needs of others.” What Justin Welby wants to draw to our attention is that, in offering a compassionate response to those who do wish to end their lives, we run the risk of endangering the lives of those who do not. As he says, “It would be very naive to think that many of the elderly people who are abused and neglected each year, as well as many severely disabled individuals, would not be put under pressure to end their lives if assisted suicide were permitted by law.”

On the other hand, here is what one of his predecessors, Lord Carey, wrote in the Daily Mail yesterday: “Until recently, I would have fiercely opposed Lord Falconer’s Bill. My background in the Christian Church could hardly allow me to do otherwise. I would have used the time-honoured argument that we should be devoting ourselves to care, not killing. I would have paraded all the usual concerns about the risks of ‘slippery slopes’ and ‘state-sponsored euthanasia’. But those arguments that persuaded me in the past seem to lack power and authority now when confronted with the experiences of those suffering a painful death.” George Carey has changed his mind. For him, “the old philosophical certainties have collapsed in the face of the reality of needless suffering.”

He cites the case of Tony Nicklinson as exerting a deep influence on him. Tony was left paralyzed after suffering a stroke in June 2005 at the age of 51. His legal battle for the right to assisted death came to an end in 2012, when his appeal was turned down by the High Court of Justice. On hearing the outcome of his case, he refused to eat, contracted pneumonia, deteriorated rapidly, and died a week later.

So who is right? What are we to think? How do we imagine God will make up his mind about how to answer our prayers for what goes on in the House of Lords on Friday? On a lighter note, it’s rather like the dilemma the Almighty
will have this evening in Brazil as he decides whether to answer the prayers of the Argentinian Pope Francis or his predecessor, the German Pope Benedict!

There is, of course, a great deal of common ground between the two sides. In particular, the word ‘compassion’ is used a great deal. The provisions of the Assisted Dying Bill are seen by its supporters as the only truly compassionate response that a civilised society can make to those who are terminally ill and who wish to end their own lives. But it would be wrong to say that such compassion is lacking in those who oppose the Bill. Their argument is simply that compassion needs to be shown, not only to those who might benefit from a change in the law, but also to those whose welfare would be placed at risk by it.

Someone else who has changed their mind in this debate is Professor Theo Boer, an academic in the field of ethics who is a member of one of the committees in the Netherlands which assess whether euthanasia cases are conducted in accordance with the law. He notes the dramatic rise in euthanasia deaths in his country over recent years – from just under 2,000 in 2006 to a projected 6,000 in 2013 – and says this: “I used to be a supporter of the Dutch law. But now, with twelve years of experience, I take a very different view. At the very least, wait for an honest and intellectually satisfying analysis of the reasons behind the explosive increase in the numbers. Is it because the law should have had better safeguards? Or is it because the mere existence of such a law is an invitation to see assisted suicide and euthanasia as a normality instead of a last resort? Before those questions are answered, don’t go there. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it is not likely to ever go back in again.”

George Carey readily acknowledges the problem: “There must, of course, be safeguards against abuse of the so-called right to die. It would be outrageous if it were extended beyond the terminally ill to an ever-widening group of people, including the disabled and the depressed.”

But here’s the issue. What makes us think that our law-makers will be able to construct water-tight legislation that works in the way that is intended to work? Especially when a) their counterparts elsewhere don’t seem to have been able to do so and b) they themselves haven’t been able to do so in the past?

Here, for example, is a comment by Norman Tebbit: “Years ago when that thoroughly decent man David Steel brought in his Abortion Bill he explained that it was not intended to provide abortion on demand, but to end the sordid trade of the back-street abortionists who frequently botched the procedure, inflicting pain and injury on their clients. Many of those who supported him did so for that reason, despite warnings that it was a step too far on a very slippery slope which would lead to abortion on demand.” As he goes on to say, “Not only has the Steel legislation been greatly widened in scope, but in practice abortion is now available on demand, well past the time when the child would be capable of survival...”

It’s no good Lord Carey dismissing arguments about the risks of ‘slippery slopes’ by saying “I would have paraded all the usual concerns...” about them – as if those concerns somehow lose their force either by being ‘paraded’ or by being ‘usual’. They don’t! The concerns remain as pressing as ever.

Which brings us back to where we started and to a question which lies, I think, close to the heart of the current debate... Do we think that, as human beings, we are basically OK and can be trusted to act in the best interests of others? Or do we think that human beings are fundamentally flawed and instinctively tend towards the self-centredness which we call ‘sin’ – with all the damage we do to our relationship with God and the hurt that we cause for other people? How we would love to think the best of ourselves – but is it wise to do so?