The last chapter of the novelist Somerset Maugham’s book ‘A Traveller in Romance’ is entitled ‘I Have Had Enough’. Here’s what he writes: “There are moments when I have so palpitating an eagerness for death that I could fly to it as to the arms of a lover - I am drunk with the thought of it. It seems to me to offer the final and absolute freedom. There are indeed days when I feel that I have done everything too often, known too many people, read too many books, seen too many pictures, statues, churches and fine houses, and listened to too much great music. I neither believe in immortality nor desire it. I should like to die quietly and painlessly, and I am content to be assured that with my last breath my soul, with its aspirations and its weaknesses, will dissolve into nothingness.”

A year later, shortly before Maugham did indeed die, at the age of 91, his nephew Robin visited his famous uncle at his luxury villa on the Mediterranean Riviera. Robin writes:

“That evening, in the drawing room after dinner, Willie flung himself down onto the sofa. ‘Oh, Robin, I’m so tired...’ He gave a gulp and buried his head in his hands. Willie looked horribly wizened, and his face was grim. ‘I’ve been reading the Bible you gave me - and I’ve come across the quotation: ‘What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul?’ I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child. Of course, it’s all a lot of bunk. But the thought is quite interesting all the same.’

When it finally comes to it, the fear of death, our culture’s great unmentionable, is real and it is universal. To claim otherwise is to risk an empty bravado that will come unstuck at the end, just as it seems to have done for Somerset Maugham.

Which is where we come to this morning’s first reading from Hebrews chapter 2. Here is the glorious possibility of being set free from the fear of death, of being liberated from anxiety about what awaits us on the other side of the grave. Would that be a help to you or to someone you know? Then this is for you...

As we unpack these verses, we discover that setting us free from the fear of death was one of the main reasons why Jesus came among us as a human being. What we celebrate at the heart of our faith is the love of a God who was prepared to identify with us to the point of becoming one of us.

So, verse 14: ‘Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he [that is, Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things...’ He really did. ‘He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew; and he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.’ Why? Why couldn’t he have merely appeared to be human and so avoided all the unpleasantness that goes along with the human condition? Why did Jesus have to become a human being? The answer in relation to the issue before us is simple but profound. Only through becoming fully human could Jesus
have truly died. Verse 14 again: ‘Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the
same things, so that through death he might...’ Might what? What does the death of Jesus achieve that nobody
else’s death could? ‘...so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’.

So how does that work? As we follow the passage through, there’s a quick detour in verse 16 but then in verse 17 we
discover a bit more: ‘Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a
merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.’

The Letter to the Hebrews isn’t always easy for us to understand, is it? That’s because it was written for people from
a Jewish background in the first century. For them, all this talk of a ‘high priest’ and ‘atonement’ would have clicked
straight away. Whereas, for us, it can all seem rather odd. What’s the writer on about?

Well, perhaps the best way to understand this is to work backwards. The clue is in the last five words - ‘the sins of
the people’. Our attention is being drawn to something we might prefer to avoid. But, as is so often the case, the
thing we would prefer not to think about is the key to the truth. Just as, when being prodded by a doctor, the bit
that makes you go ‘ouch’ is probably the bit that requires closer attention!

Stepping back to take the bird’s eye view then, the writer is saying that the reason the devil holds the power of
death over us, the reason that we fear death so much, is because of sin, the way in which our lives fall short of God’s
standards. The ‘sins of the people’ are the big problem.

So what has Jesus done about them? Answer: he has made atonement for them. The best way of thinking about
what ‘atonement’ means is to split the word up and see it as ‘at-one-ment’. It’s about bringing together those who
have previously been estranged. It’s about removing barriers. It’s about encouraging reconciliation, a central aspect
to what this Cathedral is all about, of course. This is what Jesus has done for us. As the writer will go on to explain in
more detail later in this letter.

The way of dealing with sin under Old Testament law is to imagine it a bit like the children’s game of ‘Tag’ or ‘It’.
Someone starts off by having, as it were, a contaminating lurgy. Everyone else immediately backs off in case the
person who is ‘It’ touches them. Because as soon as the person who starts off being ‘It’ *does* manage to touch
someone else, they become free and the person they’ve touched becomes ‘It’ instead. And so it goes on until ‘It’
ends up as the slowest child on the playground, taunted and rejected by everyone else.

Something rather similar went on in Old Testament times. Those who were conscious of sin and wanted to be
forgiven would transfer their guilt by touching the head of a sacrificial animal. The animal would then be killed by the
priest or sent off to die in the wilderness. On one special day each year, the Day of Atonement, this would be done
on a grand scale by the high priest. But the idea is the same. The contamination of sin is taken away by being
transferred to an ‘It’.

What the writer to the Hebrews is explaining is that Jesus stepped forward and volunteered to be the once and for
all ‘It’ for us. So that when we, as it were, reach out and touch him, all our contamination, everything that keeps us
at a distance from God, flows away from us and onto him. When he died, it’s as if all our sin and guilt died with him.
That’s why he had to die. There was no other way to defuse the bomb of human sin. There was no other good
enough. There was no other way to absorb and neutralise the poison of evil.

That’s why Jesus had to become fully and truly human. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to die. And if he
hadn’t been able to die, he wouldn’t have been able to make atonement for the sins of the people. And if he hadn’t
been able to make atonement for the sins of the people, death would remain as an enemy to be feared.
For death is one of three things. It is either the end, full stop. Or it is the trapdoor to whatever we understand by hell. Or it is the gateway to heaven. Not being sure which is what makes death such a fearful prospect. But the good news is that we *can* be sure which. This is what Jesus died to make possible for us. He shared in our humanity ‘so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’.

When it comes to our turn, there is no need for us to be like Somerset Maugham. We can instead echo the words of Isaac Watts in our first hymn this morning:

Should all the hosts of death,
and powers of hell unknown,
put their most dreadful forms
of rage and mischief on,
I shall be safe,
for Christ displays superior power,
and guardian grace.

Amen.