

Background and Commentary

Background

Seren's speech was just one of over forty contributions made at an RE debate which took place in a local authority Council Chamber which was made available to the schools for a morning at no charge. Five separate debates took place. Each debate lasted around 30 minutes. Ten secondary schools were involved and each school provided a debating team of four young people although most schools brought other students and so over seventy students in total participated. As well as the issue of voluntary euthanasia other topics discussed included, "Can war ever be just?", "The problem of evil", "Capital Punishment" and "the right to practice religion in public" Although each debate involved a team speaking for and a team speaking against a motion, a conscious effort is made to ensure that the debates are non-adversarial. The students are told long before the debate takes place that this is not an opportunity to mock the opposition, be discourteous, use inflammatory language, make dishonest or unsubstantiated factual claims, engage in emotional bluster, make derisive personal comments, or cloud the issue with irrelevant "red herrings", or misrepresent the views of other speakers. A vote was taken at the end of each of the debates but the vote was strictly about the issue and not about which was the best debating team.

Commentary

Seren was the third member of her school's debating team arguing for the motion voluntary euthanasia should be made legal in Britain. The first two speakers had up to three minutes to put their case but the third and fourth speakers were permitted no more than one minute. Seren actually speaks for only forty-five seconds. However, from start to finish it is a remarkably mature, controlled and coherent presentation. She uses pared-down, plain speak, no nonsense, almost Spartan language. Yet each word is measured and weighed and counts for something. It provides a lesson in how being verbose is often no great advantage and that less is often more. She begins with what seems like a piece of self-deprecation with the words, "I talk from personal experience. That's all I have." Yet she quickly she establishes that actually on this subject she speaks with some authority. What she is talking about is not an academic, fictitious or a hypothetical issue. For Seren this is no classroom exercise. This has nothing to do with being prepared for the world of work or for something which may or may not confront her in the future. This issue concerns her now, it's personal, it's serious, it's real and it hurts. It provides a reminder, should one be needed, that the moral problems that confront people, including young people, are often messy, bitter and difficult. There are no easy answers. All answers are hard, painful, unwelcomed and unwanted. Although she could easily do so she chooses not to provide a highly emotive account of the frustrations and daily indignities her cousin Ben has to endure. Nevertheless in a few brief simple words she leaves the listener in no doubt as to the limitations on the life that Ben is forced to live - "He can't eat, sleep, or talk, or walk." That is probably the heart of her argument. Her case is what purpose does it serve to have to continue to live in such discomfort? Seren makes it clear that for Ben, "He doesn't want to live anymore" but given his condition he has no choice. And the other option, that others may end his life for him is also not available as the law does not permit it. Ben and his family have drawn their own conclusion and she leaves her listeners to draw theirs.

How might the work be improved?

Given that Seren had only one minute to provide a final summing up it seems churlish to suggest how she could have done better. Adding anything more may well have detracted from what she did say. However, there are arguments that challenge what Seren said. Should she have pointed these out and addressed them? Perhaps? The previous speaker, speaking against the motion had argued that, "God gives life and God takes it away and that humans have no say in the matter." Could Seren in fifteen seconds have said anything useful to challenge this argument? Possibly - exceptional debaters are good listeners and are flexible thinkers who can add or alter material should the need arise. Having thought through the issue in some depth they can anticipate challenging arguments and come prepared with a response should one be needed. A brief view words from Seren challenging the claim that a loving God for some unspecified reason requires people like Ben to live a life of unremitting discomfort and frustration which they are forbidden to opt out of may not have gone amiss.