

Sermon 2.4.17

Rev Raymond Wood

Death and Resurrection

The beginning of Passion-tide is always a sombre time and each of today's readings refers to the subject of death, which naturally many people wish to avoid as long as possible. However, Jonathan Swift, in one of his lesser-known Gulliver's Travels stories, tells of a people called the Struldbrugs, some of whom were born with a curious mark on their forehead. The mark indicated that they could never die. When this mark was seen on a newborn babe there was great lamentation: for they would get older, and older, and older; and increasingly lonely. They were objects of pity and remained so for ever. For them there was no hope. No possibility that they could reach the goal of 'the upward call of God'.

So let us be thankful that death is the one experience through which we must pass sooner or later: for death is merciful when it comes in the fullness of time. St Francis knew that, when he described our final release as "Sister Death" to be welcomed like other elemental things; such as the stars, fire, day, and night. But death does not always come in the fullness of time. Sometimes it strikes at an early age. The late Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley, quoted the example of a great friend of his whose little boy died at age 13. That friend wrote to the Bishop. "My wife and I know that God loaned us Johnny for 13 years. We did our best to train him for immortality, and now we've handed him back to the Lord who lent him to us". Such assurance is a great comfort. Death holds no terrors for them; as it holds none for me. Not that I wish to die yet! But when my time comes, I am prepared.

How does one prepare for this supreme adventure of death? First, by facing it squarely and living each day as though it might be our last: by being ready to go, packed for the journey. When working in commerce in Borneo over 50 years ago, I faced the very real possibility of death at least once every month during my travels. In fact the chance then of being killed in the jungle by Indonesian terrorists was more of a probability than a possibility. So, before each trip it was routine for me to dictate to my secretary notes of outstanding work that would need attention if I did not return. Likewise I would always leave my desk tidy, a habit that is still with me. Strange as it may seem, I believe that we cannot really live this life to the full each day with pleasure, without assuming it may be our last. As Jesus said (Matthew 6.34): "do not be anxious about tomorrow".

Secondly, and most importantly, we must prepare for it by entering the eternal life now so that, when the death of the body comes, it will be a small thing in a greater whole. In essence we must accept now from God the gift of eternal life: remembering that eternal life is not a going-on of life as we know it, but a going

into a new life with God. This takes us into a heightened awareness of life, and makes all things new. You may think that this is easy for a priest, but it is not. When I receive an unexpected shock in life (and there have been quite a few) all my doubts and disbeliefs swell in a flood of feeling. It is then that one needs to hold fast to the Christian hope. Christian hope is to be found in three things. First: in the fact of the resurrection. Secondly: in the necessity for judgement. And thirdly: in the need for a personal acceptance of Jesus as Saviour.

In his book "Man Alive", Michael Green writes: "The resurrection showed Paul that so far from wrestling under God's curse, Jesus was in fact the key to all God's blessing". No wonder Paul went round the ancient world passing on this shattering discovery, of a god who cared enough to stand in for us in the face of our greatest needs. No wonder he insisted on preaching Jesus and the resurrection. In common with the rest of the Christians he had come into a new dimension of life. He couldn't keep quiet about it - he had to pass it on. For this Jesus who died on the cross and rose again three days later, held the key to what life was meant to be - and what it could be. Here was someone so fully alive that death could not hold him. This was news! Yes, the centre of our Christian hope is in the fact of the resurrection, witnessed to by millions throughout the centuries who have known that their Redeemer lives.

The second great reality for Christians is the inevitability of judgement. In a sense we are judging ourselves, in that an unwise life brings its own consequences, as many learn. But more importantly, God is judging us, by our love or lack of love for others. Not only will he judge our actions but also our thoughts and motives which, try as we may, cannot be hidden from him. This is why being kind to others in action is not enough. Our motives for our kind actions must not be suspect. It is precisely because of this inescapable fact of divine judgement that the need for a personal and decisive acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour cannot be delayed. The offer of eternal life is now, because the offer of eternal love is now. An act of will is required and an act of commitment. It means giving as much as we see of ourselves, to as much as we see of God as revealed in Jesus. We start there. We may not understand it all; probably we never will. We start by saying: "Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief".

For some, this commitment of will and heart only comes after having had the assurance of forgiveness. That great Saint, Peter, is an example. That right-hand man of Jesus denied his Lord in his greatest trial. Peter's conversion to Jesus was not complete until after his failure, his weeping, his forgiveness, and his restoration. From that moment his heart was broken; but he was grateful. At the time, it seemed the end of everything for which Peter had hoped and dreamed. Yet it led to an even more fruitful life in the future. To a lesser extent I have shared that feeling, strengthened in the assurance of divine forgiveness.

For the only way to face death unafraid, for ourselves or for someone else, is to find eternal life through acceptance of God now; with the assurance that we can share in Christ's resurrection. That way we will still continue to be sorry for ourselves whenever we mourn the loss of someone we love deeply. But we will not be sorry for them. For how can we be sorry for someone whom we know has been called into God's closer presence in eternal life? For as St John's Gospel (17.3) tells us: "Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent".

The most helpful remark made to me on this subject was by a lady whose five-month old baby had died. She said to me quite simply and sincerely: "God doesn't only want the old ones". I have always felt what a lovely thought that is - and it is a source of great strength to remember it.

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