

Reflection for Thursday 19th November 2020

Each year the Church gives us this month of November, the month of the Holy Souls, to encourage us to look at death, reflect on it and to consider the mystery of our own mortality as well as the mystery of our immortality, and the immortality of all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, some, maybe as recently as last week; others, maybe last year, or many years ago. At this time of the year we also have the blessing of the graves in local cemeteries, but of course in the current restrictions this has not been possible. It helps us to remember that we do not live forever and that one day, and we do not know the day nor the hour, we will be called by Almighty God.

But we live in a culture which tries to deny the reality of death, it is still very much a taboo subject. We have been told that all these restrictions to our freedoms are worthwhile in case we catch the virus and die. Strangely enough Covid is actually the 19th cause of death at the moment in this country. In other words there is more chance of dying through contracting 18 other illnesses first. One of the restrictions placed upon us is not to do any unnecessary travelling around the country, although ironically we are allowed to travel to Switzerland for the purpose of assisted dying.

Far from running away from death, the Church actually encourages us to face death by contemplating the four last things, death, judgement, heaven and hell, not to be morbid but to keep us in touch with our eternal destiny. Should we be frightened of death? We should be frightened of an unprepared and unprovided death, but a good Catholic should live in a state of readiness for death by living in a state of grace.

The Church invites us to do as St. Francis of Assisi did, to come to the point where we think of death as “Sister Death”, where we look upon the hour of its arrival, an hour known only to God, as a gift which God will give in his own good time, a most surprising and paradoxical gift because, while it looks like the end, it is really only the beginning, the very path to life in its fullness.

We can learn a lot from someone who is prepared for death having lived a holy life close to Jesus, but it is still sad to lose someone we love even if our faith is strong. This is why we wear violet or black vestments at Requiem Masses because our reflection on death is tinged with sorrow because we miss those we have loved who have died, because we mourn their passing, and a sorrow because we know, as well as we know our own selves, that those who have died were not perfect, they could have been better and that is a great sadness. We should be careful that we do not canonise those who have died and commit the sin of presumption, thinking that they have already reached heaven.

Nothing which is imperfect can enter heaven, so if through prayer and penance in this life, we have not yet been purified of all that sin and selfishness, then we still need to go through some purifying process before entering the eternal presence of God. What that process is like is not for us to speculate, but we call it purgatory. But purgatory is not a final destination it's a temporary state, it is victory, the victory of Christ: the triumph of light over darkness, of hope over fear, of life over death. Every Mass we celebrate brings us into the closest possible contact with the central mystery of the Christian faith: the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so we pray this month for those who have gone before us, for our friends and family, for the parishioners we have lost, for those who went off to fight for King and Country in war and never came home again, for those who died tragically in accidents or from sickness and disease, and for those who went home to the Father after a long and happy life, having done their bit towards the building of God's kingdom in this world.

We pray for those whose love has shaped and formed us, members of our family and friends who have been separated from us by death but with whom we are still very much united in the Communion of Saints. We pray also for ourselves too, we who are still on this great journey of life. We pray with the kind of confidence voiced by St. Paul when he dared to look death in the face with defiance and ask: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

The traditional practice of the Church, praying for the dead, is grounded in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. We believe that God's holy people is made up of those who have passed from this life and those who are still living; and we believe that among those who have died are the saints in glory and those still being purified in Purgatory. The Communion of Saints says that there is a communion between the living and the dead, that death cannot separate us from the love of God, nor from each other. It is a communion best expressed by our prayers for them and their prayers for us and the best prayer we can make is to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for the happy repose of their souls.

Deacon Kevin

