

The Great Flight from God, Life and Death

There has been a huge revolution in funeral services in western countries but maybe also elsewhere. This revolution, which is the growing popularity of unattended funerals, both reflects and drives our flight from God, life and death in the west. In the unattended funeral, the family dispenses with the hallowed necessity of viewing the coffin (ideally, an open coffin). In this travesty of the rites of grief and passing, the reality and management of death is wholly given over to the undertaker who, alone, will prepare the body and take the deceased direct to the grave or the crematorium with ne'er a relative nor a friend in sight. Meanwhile the family will probably (but not necessarily) have a life celebration where there will be neither mourning, nor any acceptance of grief or pain, but rather, in their places, a self-comforting miasma of idealised sentimental eulogies, songs, poems and the like entirely bereft of God of course, salvation, judgement and the hope of eternal life.

Being reconciled to our mortality can be a theoretical thing until we are all, at some point or other in our lives, confronted with death and dying in a most direct and personal way, in our own lives and in the lives of our loved ones. Mostly, we all try and hide or ignore death in our daily living. *That* we live and *that* we die is so obvious, it barely needs mentioning. However, *how* we live and *how* we die constitute the most important questions. Even when not faced with the possibility of a terminal disease or condition, we should all live with profound thanksgiving towards God for every day of our existence and live it as if it were our last. Let us not be like the rich fool and his barns in this parable of Christ:

The Lord spoke this parable: "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they

be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." As He said this, Jesus called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."¹

We invariably live as if indeed there will be a tomorrow; but for all of us, eventually, and maybe sooner rather than later, there may not be. Living life to the full means accepting this (initially) difficult truth of the fragility as well as the beauty of life. Not accepting this leads to a life less well lived amid a 1,001 distractions. This even applies to family life and all the family therefore have to deal with the possibility of loss, both before and after any life threatening event. But of course, acceptance is not enough in the face of the enormity of death. Death strikes us in some way as unnatural to our human condition; and in this we would be right! Orthodox Christianity insists that death was not and is not God's intention for his creation generally and human beings specifically. Christ could, of course, have just died a noble death without death itself being overthrown but that was not God's plan. He rose from the dead to undo death for all men. Whether we benefit from that is up to us!

When we die, of course, is in God's hands. To the carnal unspiritual mind this seems to lack all fairness and justice. Why, do these say, the innocent so often die young and the wicked prosper until a great old age² Maybe the wicked are given more time to repent rather than the innocent who have no or little need of repentance. The value of a life is not after all to be measured in terms of its length but rather its quality, day by day.

There is another issue to be faced of course which is suffering. Medical science has done wonders to extend life and pain relief is a great blessing to humankind. Nonetheless, all of us have times of suffering; physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Christianity is utterly unique among world religions in that it teaches that God Himself as come among us, sharing both our humanity and its associated moments of pain, suffering and even death upon a cross. To commit oneself to Christ is to find a wonderful resource to rise above even the most grievous suffering because, He, the Lord, is a load bearer for us ... with wounds in His body to prove it. Our faith is also utterly unique in that it offers humanity a fully human

¹ Luke 12:16-21

² Job 21:7-17

life in the New Creation beyond death where our resurrection bodies will suffer neither mourning, nor crying nor pain and every tear will be wiped from our eyes in the Kingdom of God where death shall be no more.³

Finally, how does our life in the Church address all of these questions? Here, in the body of Christ (the Church, the people) gathered each resurrection day (Sunday) we all have a source of great strength, healing and consolation in these two senses of the Body of Christ ... the church community of faith, and the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. True, there is anointing with holy oil for healing but the greatest healing sacrament of all is the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist and Holy Communion.

Do not then neglect to assemble with the faithful⁴ and receive Holy Communion, confessing your sins and being filled with His life. Keep your hearts and minds with and in Christ and whatever shall befall you, you will be safe and secure in Him. Above all, be deaf to the sirens in our collapsing western culture that try to beguile us away from Christ and the realities of both life and death addressed in the gospel.

Let us live then as St Paul and all the saints lived and died, taking the Apostle's words to heart from his letter to the Christians at Rome, these suffering daily from the scourges of persecution and death but with the joy of Pascha in their breasts. In his words

[For] if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died [a]nd rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.⁵

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³ Revelation 21:4

⁴ Hebrews 10:25

⁵ Romans 14:8-9