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March 18, 2018

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What do you think about death? About your death? It is a subject that we often try to avoid — a reaction that only strengthens its ability to disturb us. Have you noticed that while lots of TV shows depict death — be it in gun battles, car crashes, murder, mayhem, war or “justifiable homicide,” entertainment rarely depicts a funeral? Death is the occasion for meting out justice, for detective skills and autopsies, but not for focusing on the deceased’s respectful burial or the grief of the bereaved.

Only our newscasts seem to pay attention to the gaping hole left in the universe when someone dies — even then, it is almost always because of their murder, suicide or fame. Even more rarely, do we get a glimpse of what someone thinks about their proximate death. Sometimes, patients in hospice will share their feelings. More often, people gather round them to express their love and support and to let them know that while they will be missed, they can move on. Death forces us to confront the deepest truths of our lives: what we have lived for and what we think it means.

On November 27, 2013, Pope Francis reflected on death during his general audience in Rome. He said, “Death affects us all, and it questions us in a profound way. ... If it is understood as the end of everything, death ... terrifies us, it becomes a threat that shatters every dream, every promise, it severs every relationship.” He suggested that if we “consider our lives as a span of time between two poles: birth and death,” such a vision of death is both reasonable and terrible. This vision, said Francis, is the logical conclusion of the atheism that “interprets life as a random existence in the world ... a journey toward nothingness,” or the “practical atheism which consists in living for one’s own interests alone.” He added that “When we think of death as the end of everything,” we “have no choice but to hide it, deny it or trivialize it so that it doesn’t scare us.”

What sadder commentary could there be on someone’s life than to trivialize their death?

Today’s Gospel presents Jesus in the moment when he realized that “his hour” had come. Here, John gives us a glimpse of Jesus’ heart as he makes the astounding statement, “I am troubled now.” The word Jesus used for being troubled was the one that described him when he shared Martha’s grief at Lazarus’ death, the same word that depicted the churning of the waters of the pool of Siloam. Jesus was deeply shaken and emotional.

Having admitted that, his next words reiterated the core orientation of his life. He was facing his end, what would both look and feel like utter defeat, and his first thought was of his Father: Should he ask his Father for an escape? Reframing

everything that was about to take place, he prayed, “Father, glorify your name.” After expressing the depth of his human frailty, Jesus took on the role of explaining the things of God. “When I am lifted up ... I will draw everyone to myself.”

John tells us that his phrase “when I am lifted up,” indicated how he would die. Like so much John wrote, this has two levels of meaning. Jesus was speaking literally about being raised on the cross. But, as John tells the passion story, Jesus approached the cross as his exaltation, the revelation of the glory of God in him. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death on the cross is the revelation par excellence of God’s unfailing love. The cross raised Jesus up as the icon of God’s everlasting love.

In October 2017, Francis again spoke about death and said, “We are all small and helpless before the mystery of death.” We can be encouraged by the fact that even Jesus quailed when he realized his hour had come. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, our high priest knows our weakness and he too prayed with supplication, cries and tears. Nevertheless, he led the way for us in saying, “For this purpose I came to this hour.”

When Jesus chose to walk into what he knew was his final hour, he did so fully aware of the cost and his purpose: “Now is the time of judgment ... now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” Only by going through his death would Jesus demonstrate that God’s love overcomes every evil. That was the purpose of his life and his glory.

Now and again, we all need to confront the fact that we will die; knowing that leads us to evaluate our purpose and the worth of each day. Blessed are we when we believe what Francis said of the moment of our death: “There hope will end and it will be a reality, the reality of life.”

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

Jeremiah’s prophecy about the new covenant God offers can be taken as the interpretive key to all of this week’s readings. The context for this promise is God’s activity of bringing the people back from exile. Like a new exodus, but without the trials of the desert, God is reconstituting the people and establishing a deeper bond with them than they had ever known. What is new about the covenant Jeremiah prophesies is the intensity of relationship with God that comes through it.

Prefiguring what Jesus would teach about fulfillment of the law rather than observance of its minutiae, Jeremiah announces that the new covenant will be written on the heart, not on stone. The people’s understanding of God and their relationship of love will be such that no one will have need of a written law. Everything that should be done will be evident in the attitudes and behavior of the people themselves. Obviously, this is an ideal, one that is very close to what Jesus preached.

An important note in this is that God does not promise that the people will become faultless. Far from it! Although Jeremiah proclaims that everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord that doesn’t mean that they are all going to fulfill their call in every dimension. The people will not become sinless saints, but rather they will know who God is and what God is like. Thus, the oracle we hear finishes with the promise, “I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.” That is an ongoing promise. In an imperfect world, sin will be recognized for what it is: an aberration, an abnormal, subhuman way of behaving which will never become the world’s permanent condition. The new covenant is one in which God is known above all else as the One whose great love offers continual forgiveness, thereby opening the way for ongoing conversion.

This is God’s unilateral promise. The core of this new covenant has nothing to do with the people’s worthiness or good behavior, but rather God’s unrelenting love and will to save them. This means that there is nothing this people can do to turn God against them. Their God will always and forever be God for them.

PSALMS 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15

“Create a clean heart in me, O God.” That’s the core petition of this psalm and the most appropriate petition we can make after contemplating today’s readings. The church prays this psalm every Friday as part of the Liturgy of the Hours, making it a constant reminder that God alone is the source of the grace that can transform us.

After singing the refrain, the first strophe of our prayer does nothing more than ask God to be God. We just heard from Jeremiah that God's stance toward humanity is one of unrelenting love and continual forgiveness. We pray this, not because God needs the request, but because we need to be reminded that the role God has chosen in relation to us is one of showing mercy and expunging our guilt.

With the third strophe, we anticipate what Jeremiah promised about the New Covenant. To the extent that we understand the heart of God, we will live in joy and our zeal will know no bounds. Then comes the promise to teach others what we have learned. If we have gotten caught up in the dynamics of the New Covenant Jeremiah proclaimed, 99 percent of that teaching will be accomplished through the example of how to live humbly and with joy.

HEBREWS 5:7-9

According to scholars, the Letter to the Hebrews is a long sermon with an address stuck on the beginning to make it seem like a letter. The New American Bible's introduction suggests that the best way to understand the letter is to listen to it proclaimed aloud as one long reading. The work aims at demonstrating the preeminence of God's activity in Christ over all previous revelation and divine interaction with humanity. It is also designed to encourage Christians who may be growing weary in their pilgrimage.

If the selection we hear today were all we knew of the Letter to the Hebrews, we would not realize that the letter presents Christ as the new and final high priest. This selection presents one of the most human portraits we have of Jesus, a parallel to the synoptic Gospels' depiction of Jesus at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. We are confronted here with Jesus whose anguish is deep and whose prayer is genuine. The author of Hebrews prepared for this selection in Chapter 4 by saying that Jesus understands human weakness from an insider's point of view, that he was tested in every way, and therefore, will receive his fellow creatures with sympathy. Our reading then offers two statements that emphasize Jesus' true humanity.

First, this selection emphasizes that Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. William Barclay in *The Letter to the Hebrews* states: "The rabbis had a saying: 'There are three kinds of prayers, each loftier than the preceding — prayer, crying and tears. Prayer is made in silence; crying with raised voice; but tears overcome all things.'" That suggests that the depth of feeling that brings tears is a sign that the prayer comes from the heart, not simply the intellect or will.

In that sense, we could say that the Hebrews passage gives us a glimpse of Jesus' heart, another way of speaking of Jesus' love for the Father. When he turned to his Father in prayer, it was not a formality of acknowledging God's greatness or even reciting the traditional prayers of his people. Jesus' prayer moved him to tears because he was exposing his deepest self, his fears, hopes and desires, and offering them to his Father. His prayer was open to genuine interaction, expressing exactly who he was and his openness to whatever action or transformation God would ask or offer. We might think that his prayer echoed Psalm 31 from which we have the line "Into your hands I commend my spirit," but which also goes through a litany of terrible troubles only to end with the proclamation "Love the Lord ... Be strong and take heart all who hope in the Lord."

Jesus' "hour," was going to call forth everything it meant to be Son of God. It put his humanity to the test and allowed him to manifest the shape and content of divine love. For that reason, he had to pray with loud cries and tears, with every ounce of his human personality; only thus could he be open to full union with his beloved Abba in everything that was about to come.

JOHN 12:20-33

Taken out of context, this story begins in a very strange way. Some "Greeks" came to celebrate the Passover and told Philip that they wanted to see Jesus. Why Philip? All we know is that he had a Greek name and had once invited Nathaniel to "come and see" Jesus (John 1:46). Philip told Andrew, and Andrew went to Jesus with the news. Although we hear nothing more of these Greeks, their request and the process serve two purposes in the story. First, this confirms what the Pharisees had just said, "Look, the whole world has gone after him" (John 12:19). Secondly, the complexity of the process of getting to Jesus recalled the difficulty with which the Jewish-Christian community accepted the people

labeled as “foreigners.” Theologically, the important point was that the Gentile world was seeking Jesus. The Greeks’ desire to see Jesus became the occasion for Jesus to make one of the most important announcements in this Gospel: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Here we get the only glimpse John gives us that Jesus struggled with the coming of his “hour.” At first, he simply taught his disciples what he thought about the coming of his hour. Reinterpreting Isaiah’s Fourth Song of the Servant of God, he taught that a grain of wheat must die to bear fruit, that whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life, and, most ominously for his disciples, “Where I am, there also will my servant be.” He then told them how he felt: “I am troubled now.”

This moment is John’s alternative to the Synoptics’ agony in Gethsemane, and just as in the garden Jesus chose the Father’s will over his own (Luke 22:42), here too he alludes to God, but starts out like a teacher. He asks if he should call on God as Father to rescue him from what is to come, but then repeating that this is his hour, he speaks directly to God: “Father, glorify your name!” With that, just as happened in other Gospels at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, a voice came from heaven, this time saying, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” Then, Jesus explains what his hour and God’s glory mean: “Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.”

When Jesus interprets his coming death as a “lifting up,” he is reminding people of Isaiah’s song of the servant: “See, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted” (Isaiah 52:13). But that verse goes on to say: “Even as many were amazed at him — so marred were his features” (52:14). John has chosen to portray this scene as one which reveals Jesus as the utterly faithful Son of God, the one for whom loss of everything for the sake of faithfulness and trust was not abandonment, but glory. John’s depiction of Jesus’ utter freedom and even joy at approaching his passion does not contradict the other Gospels, but reveals a different dimension of the same truth they tell.

John presents us with Jesus as the one who goes freely to his death and overcomes death. Death is the ultimate threat to humanity and every sort of fear and selfishness ultimately springs from the fear of death. But Jesus, the one who has come as a servant, as one of the little ones, approaches death in freedom and trust. Then he promises to draw all to him in that same atmosphere.

That is what John means when he tells us that Jesus being lifted up, indicated the kind of death he would die. John was not only referring to the cross, but saying that Jesus’ death would be an exaltation that would attract the whole world into his sphere of freedom and love. The kind of death he would die was one which would reveal the New Covenant and the ever-forgiving love of God.

Planning: 5th Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

If you are celebrating the third scrutiny today, you will be using the Cycle A readings: Ezekiel speaks of God opening graves and raising the dead; Paul speaks of the body as dead but the spirit as alive; Jesus raises Lazarus from his tomb. If you are using the Cycle B readings, you will also be hearing about death and resurrection: Jeremiah foresees a New Covenant with God; Paul speaks of the suffering and death of Christ; Jesus speaks of the seed dying to produce much fruit. Both sets of readings offer a great opportunity to really call the entire assembly to deeper conversion.

The thrust of the readings in both cycles is similar because we are approaching the Triduum, three days in which we are all called to die again to sin and selfishness and to rise to fuller life in Christ. The challenge for planners and preachers is to make this call to conversion clear and to invite the assembly to fully enter into the dynamic that shapes the Triduum.

It is true, of course, that this is our challenge every week, since every Eucharist draws us into contact with the death and resurrection of Christ. But Lent, Triduum and Easter form the annual cycle that calls us more explicitly and more deeply into the process of conversion. As Lent progresses, that call becomes more and more insistent, leading us to our fullest celebration of the paschal mystery during the Triduum.

How can you help your parishioners recognize this call and embrace its challenge? Preachers and planners might first ask themselves if they are fully embracing the meaning of these central seasons of the liturgical year. If so, what has helped you to do that? If not, what would help you at this point in Lent? Share your insights with other planners and see if the sharing gives you ideas for how to help the larger assembly.

Preachers, of course, have the strongest platform from which to call for deep conversion, but planners should look at the whole liturgy to see where they can support the same call.

The third scrutiny should invite not only the elect but the whole assembly into the death and resurrection experience. Can you create petitions for the scrutiny that strongly focus on our need to die to sin so that we might rise renewed? What about the general intercessions for the Mass? Are there songs that musicians can select (for this Sunday and Palm/Passion Sunday) that focus attention on dying and rising?

Next Sunday's main liturgy, ideally all the Masses, begins with the blessing of palms and the procession into the worship space. Announce this weekend where people should gather when they come for this special service.

Prayers: 5th Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

As Lent progresses, we come closer to the heart and meaning of the Gospel: that Jesus must suffer and die for new life to happen. There is nothing here about rules, practices, theological formulae or perfection. Jesus embraced what is painful and frightening to achieve life on our behalf. Those of us who call ourselves Christian must be willing to walk the same road.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you showed us that whoever loves his life must lose it: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you said that whoever serves you must follow you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you gave yourself willingly on our behalf: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now for the needs of the world and for all who are called to walk the path of Jesus.

Minister For the whole church: that we may have the courage to follow where Jesus leads us ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For all who have suffered on behalf of those in need or danger, especially members of the military, civil rights martyrs, and first responders ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For all of us who are called to make sacrifices on behalf of our families; and for gratitude for those who serve us in any way ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those who are suffering, those who have lost hope, and those who feel they have little to give others ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those who consider Christianity easy, painless or a path to privilege ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For those among us who are sick, dying or grieving; and for those struggling to accept suffering and death as an essential part of life ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

Presider God who calls us, we pray for the courage to walk the path we entered at baptism. Help us to rely on you and on one another as we strive to faithfully walk where Jesus walked. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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