

Homily for The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) 25th July 2010 Annual Day for Life

Today is the annual 'Day for Life', and this year the theme of the day is death. Our Catholic faith gives us unique insights into what it means to be human, on what it means to live, so it is hardly surprising that we will find something very strong and powerful here on the meaning of death. It isn't a subject that we feel very comfortable talking about. Plenty of people have noticed that in our society death is a great taboo, something we do not mention. It wasn't always so, and it does appear that until 100 years or so ago people saw death as part of life; people were familiar with it, they saw people dying, and people dead; they took part in extended funeral rites, and continued to pay visits to churchyards and cemeteries to pray, and to decorate and care for graves. It was probably the First World War, with its torrent of death, grief and mourning that put an end to all of this; there were just too many deaths to cope with fully mourning each, and they happened far away so that families never saw the dead, and in many cases never even saw their graves. Since then we have hidden death away, unspoken of, unacknowledged; it is almost as if we think that speaking about it will cause it to happen. There are, apparently, 200 different euphemisms in the English language that allow us to refer to death without really mentioning it¹.

We are uncomfortable with talking about death, because it raises lots of issues that we find it difficult to think about. Human beings were created for life, and death was not a part of God's original plan for us; we instinctively shy away from it, because it is alien to our nature. Even Jesus feels horror at his approaching death, and he weeps at Lazarus' tomb, even though he knows he will shortly raise him from the dead. But there is more to our silence than this. Death also makes us feel uncomfortable because it confronts us with fundamental questions such as, what will happen when we die? Is death simply the end? Does death extinguish all I have done, all I have been? For many people these are unsettling questions, so they are avoided by hiding death away and maintaining a steady silence, by pretending it won't happen. We take the Woody Allen approach: "I am not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens". The unavoidable truth, however, is that what we believe about death has a profound affect on how we live. If I see death as a defeat that I want to avoid at all costs, I will behave very differently to someone who sees death as simply the way to a different experience of life. St Francis saw death as a sister to be embraced, who would lead him to the Father, and so the decisions he would take about how he lives will be very different from a person who sees death as an enemy to flee from. It goes without saying that where people are confused or uncertain in what they believe about death, their approach to all the big questions of life will also be confused and uncertain: "In the last analysis, it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions that life puts to us." Dag Hammarskjöld.

¹ <http://www.dyingmatters.org/site/why-talk-about-it/interesting-facts-about-dying>

Death first appears in Eden as a result of sin. It is always in the nature of sin that it separates, fragments, destroys, and this is precisely what happens here. The order and beauty of creation is disrupted; people are fragmented, separated from one another and from creation, as well as from God. It is this sense of fragmentation, of separation, that most disturbs us about death. Our family, our community, our Church, our town, our country, is no longer as it was. The pattern of relationships has been upset and we feel a terrible, heartbreaking sense of separation. For those who have never thought about death, who have no system of beliefs to follow, no concept of what death might mean, this is hard to overcome – so, often, they are driven once again to silence, to ignoring it, to hoping it will simply go away. The key challenge that surrounds death is, how do we make sense of this fragmentation, of everything we knew suddenly being blown apart?

The Catholic understanding of death, which is, of course, simply based on our Catholic understanding of what human beings are, addresses this head-on. Our Catholic approach to death starts with the death and resurrection of death. In his death there is a terrible separation. Not only is he separated from his friends and his family, but his soul and his body are wrenched apart. That is what death is, a radical separation where body and soul are parted; yet this does not end the story. Jesus is raised from the dead; through God's power body and soul are reunited. Separation is overcome, and is replaced by integration. It is this movement, by which that which had been torn apart is knitted together once again, that is the pattern for the Church's pastoral care of the sick.

When someone is ill, a sense of alienation, of separation, falls over them like a cloud. They are no longer able to do what they used to do; they become strangers to their past selves, perhaps strangers to their bodies, too, because their bodies no longer do what they used to, what they ought to. People are unable to do what they used to, so they no longer see the people they used to at work, or at home, or at leisure. They become separated from so many things. Our Catholic approach is to do what we can to undo this. People cannot get to mass, so we take communion to them; they cannot get to see their friends, so we visit them; they no longer feel a part of the community, so we pray for them, and we pray with them; their bodies let them down, and seem alien to them, so with great love and tenderness the priest anoints them with oil, and the hands which have been given to God at ordination act now as God's hands, reaching out to touch with love the person who is sick. If someone's sickness brings them close to death, we gather at their bedside to pray with them, and to pray for them; the voices of those gathered at the bedside mingle with the prayers of the saints and this sick person becomes the focus that brings together the Church on earth and the communion of saints. All is directed at bringing integration and wholeness. The final prayers that the priest says look back over the person's life as well as looking forward to heaven, and so both parts of their life, before and after bodily death, are firmly tied together. All is being made whole once more.

Of course, in spite of all this, death is still felt as a shattering loss, a terrible separation. Nothing can conceal this, and nor should it. But slowly the Church's

pastoral mission once again begins to set about reintegrating, making whole. This begins at the funeral, where the whole community gathers around the bereaved to offer support and solidarity, to reinforce a sense of belonging, and the body of the person that has died is brought once more to the Church where they worshipped. If they are buried in our churchyard then once again they take their place among the bodies of those they knew in life. Still they remain a part of our community, and every time we pass the grave we remember them, and stop to pray. Our prayers, day by day and year by year ensure that our connection with these people does not break, and as we pray for people, or offer mass for people, people perhaps long dead, the sense that we are still connected to them remains.

Where death is seen as a full stop that destroys all, and stops us from doing anything, it is truly terrifying. But, for us Christians, in death 'life is changed, not ended'². We continue to live, but in a different way. We remain connected to those who still live, and there is work for us still to do: "I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth" (S. Therese of Lisieux). Death is a moment of transition, not an ending. In a sense, the instant of momentous change is not death, it is baptism. From the day of our baptism we have been grafted onto Christ, so we are already living as citizens of Heaven; we have plunged with him into the tomb, so we will leap with him to everlasting life. So we can start to make friends with our own deaths, like St. Francis, or St. Paul who said: "I am caught in this dilemma; I want to be gone and to be with Christ, and this is by far the stronger desire – and yet for your sake to stay alive in this body is a more urgent need." (Phil. 1.23-4)

² Roman Missal, Preface of Christian Death I