

November 10, 2013 Life After Death Homily

Dear brothers and sisters, one of the greatest storytellers of the nineteenth century was a devout Christian, Fyodor Dostoevsky. In his classical novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Russian author has a woman searching to rediscover her faith in a life after death in a dialogue with the famous holy monk, Father Zossima.

She asks herself whether there is any life beyond the grave. Does she live only to disappear without a trace? She had faith as a child, but how can she as an adult have a faith in life after death? Where is she to look for proofs that will satisfy her reason and calm all her fears? The holy monk gives her this answer;

"There is no proving it, though you can be convinced of it... How? By the experience of active love. In so far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul. If you attain perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been tried. This is certain".

In other words, love has the upper hand in our daily struggle with the mystery of death. Christ came to bring us life in all its fullness. (Jn. 10:10). God himself is a Trinity of Persons in which there is a mutual exchange of love.

In our gospel reading (Lk: 27-38), Jesus is in a dialogue with some Saducees, who were priests associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. This party of Jews accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah) as authoritative, and could find no evidence whatsoever for a belief in a resurrection of the dead. In his masterful reply Christ reminded his adversaries that "God is not God of the dead but of the living" (Lk. 20:38), that there exists a permanent relationship between God and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who have been dead for many years. They are truly alive in God. All that remains is to await the final resurrection of their bodies.

Recently, I received a phone call from my brother, who was deeply distressed upon learning that a close, personal friend was diagnosed with stage four cancer. Given my long history as a cancer patient, he thought that I might be able to lift his spirits and assure him of my prayers for his healing. He also requested that I place a call to him as soon as possible.

In anticipation of my phone call, I reflected that what is especially consoling, indeed a reason for joy, is not so much adding a few years to my life or his but the far more satisfying revelation that there is life after death, and that my brother's friend and I are destined to share in Christ's own resurrection.

Scripture reminds us time and again that our earthly life is brief and that our thoughts must be riveted on our approaching death, which can strike us unawares.

Why do we fear death?

The recently retired Pope Benedict has written;

“There are many reasons. First, we fear death simply because we are afraid of the void, afraid to step out into the completely unknown. We rebel against death because we simply cannot believe that so many great and meaningful things that occur in a life suddenly fall into oblivion. We resist death because love demands eternity and because we cannot accept the destruction of love that death brings with it. We fear death because none of us can quite shake off the feeling that there will be a judgment in which the memory of all our failures emerges unvarnished that we otherwise are so busy finding a way to suppress.”

Several years ago, a close personal friend of mine visited one of my relatives, who was dying of cancer. She found my cousin to be anxious and sad. When asked for the reason for her anxiety and sadness, my cousin replied that, as the hour of her death drew near, she feared God's Judgment. (For a number of years she had worked for a state Senator who was an abortion rights advocate.)

Our sins seem to weigh heavily upon us as death closes in and we must bid farewell to our loved ones!

Whenever we recite the Apostle's Creed, we affirm our belief in life after death. "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come."

In affirming eternal life in the presence of his critics, we read the following words: "Teacher you have spoken well" (Lk. 20:39). Let us be warmed by Christ's wisdom and prepare ourselves for that inevitable day when each of us is called home.

Amen