

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 13-14, 2021.

Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13: 24-32

“Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.” In his hauntingly beautiful meditation on death, English poet John Donne (+ 1631) gave voice to the stark reality that death is neither as powerful as many presume, nor ought it to be feared, as too many do. November is a most fitting month to consider the **Four Last Things**: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

The Greek word for “end times” is *eschaton*. While in the seminary, I considered taking a semester elective entitled “Eschatology,” the branch of theology dealing with these realities. Yet, with the prospect of discussing death and hell for three weeks each, I changed my mind. In retrospect, I should have chosen differently.

While we might prefer to avoid these realities, consider them we must. We ought not be afraid of sacred scripture that speaks of the end of the created order and the culmination of the universe. It is part of God’s plan. Jesus indicates as much in our Gospel today, when he says that the sun will be darkened, the moon will no longer shine, and the stars will fall out of their place.

Our first reading from the prophet Daniel is clearly eschatological in its tone. He presents a vision in which he hears the Lord describe that day when many “who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament.” What is going on here? Death is indeed a mystery.

Eschatology focuses on these aspects of the soul in life and beyond. Only after the seminary, did I begin to “re-think” my opposition to studying or discussing issues related to bodily death. I can pinpoint the precise moment of change– it was 25 years ago today, in 1996.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago had staved off cancer once, but it came back a few years later with a vengeance– the dreaded pancreatic cancer. He died twenty-five years ago today. But it is what he said in his final months that has stuck with me ever since:

I needed to be reminded that if you see death as a transition, if you see death as part of your incorporation of the Paschal mystery (the Easter mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection), then why should you not see it as a friend?" (He even added): If you see death as a friend, you begin to talk with your friend, and little by little, some of the fears begin to dissipate.¹

Now, not everyone can approach impending death in this manner. I am surely not yet there! Nor can every person pre-plan a funeral, including choosing the music or readings, selecting a gravestone, etc. We are not all “wired” the same way, and that is perfectly okay.

As faithful Catholics, we ought to devote particular attention to those who are elderly and to those who are nearing the end of life. There is nothing sadder, than visiting someone in a nursing home only to find out that his or her own family rarely, if ever, comes by for a visit. There could be many reasons for this, I cannot know.

But the loneliness that some feel in the closing chapters of life has been a continuing source of reflection for me, as I am all too aware of my need to get out more than I do to visit the elderly.

Donne's Sonnet ends with the ultimate victory, namely the death of death itself. *“One short sleep past, we wake eternally/ And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.”* Thus, “one short sleep past,” that is, after we are dead a fleeting moment, “we wake eternally.” We will wake up resurrected, to eternal life, never to sleep or die again.

¹ Interview of Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, *New York Times Magazine*, October 1996. In print for the December 1, 1996 print edition.

Then, death will cease to exist altogether– it will die. Here now the personified Death has been shown to be not “mighty and dreadful” but a mere mortal–even less than we mortals– since death will die an eternal death at the resurrection, whereas we mortals will enjoy eternal life.

The final pronouncement, “Death, thou shalt die” completes the idea that Death is the one who should be afraid, not the one to be feared. With and in Christ, we can turn the tables once for all on bodily death. It does not have the last word– Christ does.

We can know neither the day nor the hour, but we can know that the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time affects the entire created order. We must prepare ourselves to live in eternal light by living in the light in the here and now. We cannot become accustomed to darkness, otherwise we will never recognize the light in the fullness of life to come.

No moment of our lives is pointless, without value or meaning. From the moment we rise in the morning, until we close our eyes for sleep at night, may we strive to make our own the words of today’s Psalm: “I set the Lord ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.”