



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## DEATH

Most of us under the age of 65 think very little about death, unless we are faced with the death of someone close to us. Sometimes even then we do not really face it. We don't want to think about death. The thought is unpleasant and sad. In our age, it is even thought to be morbid to dwell very much on one's own mortality.

Moreover, we live in a culture which tries to deny death at every turn. We exalt our technological achievements in medicine, with the corollary that the doctor should always have something to try as an alternative to dying. Death becomes a kind of defeat instead of the common lot of man. Again, there is the language of euphemism used by some undertakers and others in the "death care" industry (I'm not kidding -- that's what it's called), which keeps us from having to face the reality of death: the ashes of one cremated are no longer ashes but "cremains", the hearse is now a "coach", and so on. The way funerals are handled also externalizes death and keeps it at arm's length. The deceased is made up to look like he's asleep instead of dead. We know in our hearts that this is all delusion: dead is dead. Yet sometimes we prefer the delusion to the reality.

For those without hope the avoidance of death is perfectly understandable. Nonchristians at best have recourse to some idea of an immortal soul which can survive the death of the body. This satisfies our natural sense that there is more to life than this physical existence. But it is not enough for us. We have no real evidence for the immortality of the soul, after all. And worse, we cannot be sure that the soul which survives is really the same as Aunt Milly. As far as we can tell, her body was an essential part of who she was.

And so Christians believe: man is body as well as soul. The afterlife is not merely an immortal soul existing disembodied somewhere. It is resurrection: bodies raised incorrup-

tible, transformed, and reunited with their souls. An audacious solution on God's part, to be sure. But we have the evidence of Christ's own resurrection for surety. His death and resurrection lie at the very heart of the Gospel, and must be at the heart of our devotions as Christians. Without Jesus' death there is no Gospel. So death is thrust into the center of Christian faith and practice. We are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection in baptism. We share His Body broken and His Blood shed in the Eucharist. We are to live by dying daily to self. The old man is to be crucified that the new man may live. (Col. 3) Christians are bound to suffer as Christ suffered, and are to rejoice when this happens (I Peter 4).

So we cannot avoid the question of death if we are to be good Christians -- of death in principle as well as our own mortality. But this leaves the question of what place meditation on our own death should have in our lives. Many of the great spiritual teachers of the Church have counseled Christians to meditate regularly on their death, and for a variety of reasons. But this is out of favor these days. People are inclined to think it morbid (or worse: Victorian) to think too much about one's own death. Thinking about death in the abstract is all right, but one should not get too specific. Are they right? Or is there still some spiritual benefit to regular reflection on our earthly end?

Obviously I think there is some benefit to be derived from meditation on our mortality. One comment needs to be made, however. Age makes a great difference in how we are inclined to see the matter. Younger adults generally assume that they will live for some time yet, and so do not feel much pressure about preparing to die. But after a certain point (generally, it seems between 60 and 75), death finds its way into our consciousness. We begin if not to think about it, at least to be aware of it. Then, if we are wise, we will make some serious preparation. It is preferable, of course, to make the preparations much earlier in life, not only because it is a long-term project, but because we cannot be assured of living into old age. We must always be ready, as our Lord so often tells us. (Think of the parables of the wise and foolish virgins, or of the Talents or of the unwatchful steward -- Matthew 24-25.) So thinking about our death will not be easy for us, especially for those below that certain age. It will require the will, as with so much of our Christian discipline.

Why then should we meditate on our death to come? First, it is one corrective to our pride. It forces us to face our finitude, that we will not go on forever. This, in turn, will spark us on to watch, to prepare, to be ready for the coming of the Lord. So often, we act as though we have plenty of time -- like the rich farmer who had no place to store his bounty, and decided to build new barns and eat, drink and take life easy, only to find his life required of him that very night (Luke 12). We cannot put off the work of Christian life. Remembering that we are to die can help us stir up our desire and get on with Christian life.

It can also whittle away at our pride by forcing us to acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves. When we see that our life on earth will end, we recognize that we will never be able to earn our way into heaven. Nothing we can do in the remaining time will merit a place with God or undo the evil deeds of our past. Looking at our death will thus help us to keep things in perspective, since we are constantly tempted to think of Christian virtue as something we have to do, rather than as something that God gives us.

Our pride in our own accomplishments is also undercut. When we think of our death, what do we think of our life? Do we think with pride of what we have accomplished or plan to accomplish? Do we look at this and pronounce it "very good" as God did to His work at Creation? Or, do we look at our life, giving thanks for the great things which God has done in and through us, and bemoaning our many failures and sins? Observing how we think of our past life tells us a lot about the condition of our souls. We find out whether we really believe ourselves to be sinners in need of redemption, or whether we are still convinced of our own goodness apart from God. If we do not measure up, we need not be too hard on ourselves. We should thank God for the grace to see these things about ourselves, and use the insight as a basis for repentance and commitment to further Christian discipline and prayer.

Meditation on our death can help much in our battles with pride. That is the first benefit. The second is that it brings us face to face with judgment. Judgment is one of the Four Last Things we often hear about in Advent (with Heaven, Hell and Death), but beyond that we tend not to think of it. At death, we will meet our Maker. We will stand before the throne of His judgment. We will answer for what we have done, and for who we are. We will answer for our sins. We will also answer for our stewardship of the things which God has committed into our hands on earth. (Remember the parable of the Talents.)

This reflection -- picturing ourselves at judgment -- can help us immensely with a serious self-examination. With our death in mind, we cannot easily delude ourselves into thinking that everything will be all right: we will do better in the future, and that that will make up for the past. We must simply face things for what they are. Then, by God's grace, we will seek to amend our lives. And we will entrust ourselves more and more to God's mercy, seeing the mess we have made of things. Death has a way of clarifying things: that which is really important becomes clear. Then we can amend our lives so that the things which are important get the priority they deserve.

Third, meditation on our death teaches us true Christian hope. Hope is so much more than we usually give it credit for. Usually we hope for things that we have no likely way of attaining on our own: wealth, healing from some disease, a perfect marriage, happiness. We hope for things we don't really expect to get. Christian hope, on

the other hand, is assured of what it hopes for: for it hopes for heaven. Heaven is presently unseen, and yet it is immensely greater and more important than all those other things we hope for on earth. When we think of death, we look forward to finally being delivered from all the trials and sufferings of this world. True, there are great joys here. But if we are honest, there is also suffering, pain, trial and difficulty. Death, we believe, will be the end of all that: God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. All will be healed, even that which now seems to be unhealable.

Moreover, after death, we will be able to see things as a whole, while we now see only through a glass darkly. We will be able to understand why: why one suffered and another seemed to have an easy life, why I had such trials, why God seemed to abandon me for a time, why I could not have had that one thing which I thought would make everything wonderful for me. We look forward to seeing it all, and understanding how God's redemption has worked through the details of our lives.

Finally, death is our gateway to the Beloved Saviour. It is the way we get to be with Jesus. We long for this. Now we know Him truly but partially. Then it will be face to face. Insofar as we love Him, we long for this. It is the fulfillment of our love, the satisfaction of our desire. It is what our love wants. So even as we recoil at the thought of dying, as Christians we also look forward to it, as the way to our Beloved.

In His providence, God has not entirely spared us from the death we merited by our sin. Christ died for us to take its terror from us. But we have still to pass through it ourselves. No doubt, God could simply have abolished death. But He has left it, that we may taste death, as Jesus drank its full cup to redeem us. We will then know His love for us as we never knew it before. His death and resurrection tell us where death leads. He has died first, that we may follow Him. He died loving us to the end: and that is how we are to die, loving Him to the end. That will be the completion of our redemption, by God's grace. We will die finally to self, and rise to God.

The love of God, the fulness of which we look forward to in death, is what gives meaning to life. It is what we are about as Christians. Meditation on our own death helps us to know the comfort of God's love. It helps us to see that this is the one supremely important fact about our life. And then our understanding of death helps us to base our lives on the reality of God's love. Nothing could in fact be less morbid. We worship one who died and is alive -- and lives to give us His life which death cannot touch.

