

5th Sunday of Lent “Memento Mori”

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I enjoy funerals for the most part. When I share this piece of information, most people cringe. People really don't know what to say to that. And I get it. Thinking about our mortality is, well, uncomfortable. Who here wants to talk about death? Answer: few if any. I find it interesting, however, to discover from our Gospel reading today that Jesus wasn't always comfortable thinking about his death either. Jesus says in our Gospel reading, “I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? Father, save me from this hour?” Jesus answers his own question with the courageous statement, “But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour, to glorify your name”.

And in this, I believe, Jesus is giving us an insight as to how we should approach our own mortality. Jesus says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.” That is a beautiful image of the resurrection, don't you think? This is why, getting back to funerals, I generally think of graveside services as gardening. It's gardening. When we bury a loved one we are planting seeds for everlasting life and it is beautiful when you think about it.

But oh how our culture is uncomfortable with the topic of mortality! We would rather think about something else, anything else. Jesus doesn't let us off the hook. He admonishes us, “Whoever loves his life, loses it. Whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” What does Jesus mean here? I think Jesus is simply warning us not to define life by how comfortable we can be. If we are comfortable all the time, this can become a spiritual problem. Some of the greatest moments of spiritual growth happen in times when we are not comfortable, during times of trial. We don't learn as much about ourselves during the good times as we do with how we carry ourselves during the bad times. Meanwhile, God can have a hard time offering salvation if we go through life feeling like we don't need saving. This is why being comfortable all the time can be a problem. Lent is meant to be a remedy.

We began our first day of Lent with ashes on our heads remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return. These words were meant to make us feel uncomfortable. It was a “memento mori”, a reminder of our mortality. We all know that being born into this world carries with it the guarantee that we will one day die. From a faith point of view, however, this recognition is not morbid at all. Quite the contrary, remembering our mortality invites us to live our lives to the fullest and avoid wasting the precious time we have so we can focus on what really matters in this life. I think it is helpful to consider all the things we think are important and I guarantee you nothing is more important in life than loving God and the people around us with the precious little time that we have. The fact that our days are numbered encourages us to love and love intensely in a way we could not otherwise. This opportunity to grow in our capacity to love prepares us for eternal life with God because God is love.

And this is why I find ministry to the suffering, dying and to families of those who lost a loved one to be very rewarding. When I meet with people who are dying and families who are grieving, they are like the people in our Gospel reading approaching Philip saying, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus”. That is how our Gospel reading began. It reminds me that, as a priest, people really don’t want to see me. They want to see Jesus. As a priest, that is what we try to do when we are in the hospital or the funeral home with the sacraments we share and the prayers of the Church we offer. Many times during these moments, in exchange, I get the opportunity to witness a family’s capacity to love each other grow by the grace of the Holy Spirit. As the prayer of the Church continues to carry them, I get to witness the growth of a family’s love for God as well, even as they grieve, because during these difficult moments we are awakened to the very basic reason why we are on this earth in the first place. Like I said earlier, we are here to love and love intensely in a way we wouldn’t be capable of otherwise unless we are mortal.

And so, for this week of Lent leading up to Palm Sunday, it may be helpful for all of us to begin meditating on how God incarnate became the grain of wheat, indeed has become food and drink for us, leading us to an eternal harvest. We are invited this week to reflect again on the words we heard on Ash Wednesday, remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. And then ask ourselves, how can I be like that grain of wheat? What are the weeds in my garden that I need to pull? How can I invest myself more into what really matters in this life? Who is that person in my life I need to stop taking for granted and love the way I am called to love? What are the ways that I can grow closer to the Lord as I make my pilgrimage to Holy Week? This is why I think a “memento mori” every so often is not all together bad. It can be in fact be very good if it helps us reorient our focus to where it should be: our Easter hope.