

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The readings this Sunday focus our attention on the subject of death. The fact that we are all destined to die one day makes some people think that human life is pointless: nothing we do or achieve has lasting value. But the revelation of God contained in the Bible and most of all in the mission of Christ, tells us that death is really the passageway to eternal life, life in communion with God, and that everything in our life here and now should be seen in that perspective.

For the times that we've been lacking that sense of our calling to eternity, we ask God to forgive us and to strengthen our faith.

Like so many of the miracles Jesus performed, this one, where he restores the synagogue official's daughter to life, not only demonstrated the great healing ability that Jesus had, but also his supernatural power over nature, over the physical world.

A lot of people doubt that the gospel miracles ever took place and they tend to find ways of explaining away all the miraculous incidents, including Jesus' own Resurrection. My own view is that if we accept the testimony of the gospel writers that Jesus of Nazareth was identified with God in a unique way - that the eternal Father and Creator appeared in human form in the person of Jesus - then I don't see why his power over nature should seem so unbelievable.

Obviously if Jesus was just a good man, an inspiring moral teacher, then there's no need to see him as being capable of performing miracles. But the reason the gospels got written in the first place was that the people who had spent years in his company, witnessing everything he said and did, felt obliged to conclude that he was far more than an ordinary "good man".

Having said that, we should realize that the important thing about all Jesus' miracles, including this one, is not the spectacular element of his spiritual power over material reality; rather, it is the meaning, or the message, that is contained in the miracle.

The raising of Jairus' daughter, like the raising of Lazarus in Saint John's gospel, is meant to bring up the themes of life and death and life and after death - themes which lie at the heart of the Christian message of salvation.

The first reading today mentions the fact that according to God's original intention, human beings were made "imperishable". We were destined to

immortality, and this is one of the main ways that we resemble God and share his nature. The symbolic meaning of the miracle in the gospel then is that Christ has knocked down the barriers to our eternal life with God and "destroyed death" as today's Gospel Acclamation puts it. Christ has restored God's original intention.

There are a lot of people who don't have any religious faith or any belief in life after death who take what we might call a resigned or pessimistic attitude to death.

Their idea is we're only here for a short while and then we're gone forever. Everything that seems so valuable, everything that gives life meaning, all forms of material success and achievement, even our closest relationships - are all, in the end, swallowed up by death.

When people reflect in this sort of way they become overwhelmed by the feeling that life is meaningless. Nothing lasts, everything passes away - so what's the point? They decide that the only thing they can do is to face up to the meaninglessness of life with clear minds, with courage, with unflinching honesty. They cultivate a kind of detachment from earthly things because they all fall from our grasp at the end of the day anyway.

Now from our Christian standpoint, we also believe that we should avoid attaching ourselves to worldly things - and for a similar reason: they don't last, they don't have any ultimate value.

But unlike the pessimistic attitude, we don't believe that death is the end of all life. We believe, as we say in the funeral Mass, that when someone dies and leaves this world behind, "life is changed, not ended". The whole witness of the Bible is a sort of gradual unfolding of the insight in the first reading: that we share God's nature and we're destined live with him in eternity.

When the door opens onto that new life, we leave behind all the hurts, sadness, and ambiguities of our lives on earth, all the faults and imperfections within our own character, all the harm that our selfishness has caused to others. This is the conclusion that was reached after the centuries of prayer and reflection and listening to God that went to make up the content of the Bible.

And so of course our belief in this future life with God makes a difference to how we go about our lives on earth.

For one thing, as Christians we see our lives here and now as a journey, a pilgrimage towards that goal. We come to sense, as Saint Paul put it, that here on earth we have "no abiding city": the place where we really belong is in complete communion with God in eternity.

But on top of that, we also see our life of Christian faith in the here and now as a preparation - a period of training or probation you might even say - because what happens to us in the next life depends on the way we conduct ourselves during this one.

It's not that God lines everyone up on some sort of Judgement Day and says to some people, "Yes, your face fits: you can get in". There's nothing arbitrary or capricious about the judgement we face at the end of our lives. It's more to do with the level of spiritual maturity and love that we've reached, the kind of values we've lived by.

In the second reading Saint Paul sums it up under the heading of generosity. Have we been sensitive to the needs and the suffering of other people, have we managed to rise above the level of pure self-interest, or have we spent our whole life closed-in on ourselves, looking after our own interests, blind to the welfare of others?

This is what's at stake in the whole issue of death and judgement. It's got nothing to do with any supposed cruel or vindictive streak on God's part.

So these are the themes that I think are raised by the readings this Sunday. In the face of death Jesus says, as he often did, "Do not be afraid. Only have faith".

Faith is the knowledge of God that takes us beyond a purely worldly-wisdom. When we start to live in contact with God we start to lose any notion that our lives have no purpose or meaning. It's faith that gradually gives us a sense of the direction our lives are supposed to move in and a sense of our real vocation as God's creatures: "to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next". AMEN.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella