

My Homily for All Souls' Day (ABC)

LESSON: The Meaning of Christian Death

Today the world's billion Catholics are all thinking about the same thing: **death**.

- This would be morbid and pessimistic, except for **one thing: Christ's resurrection**.
- Jesus, with his resurrection, has **conquered** the frightening reality of death, and so as long as we are united to him we do not need to **fear** it.
- Besides, it is one of the **few things** we can count on in life, so we **better** think about it sometimes.

In fact, Jesus himself talked about it **a lot**, shedding light on some of the awe-inspiring **mysteries** surrounding death, such as what the Church has long called "**the four last things**" [death, judgment, heaven, and hell].

- For instance, the New Testament teaches us that every person **only dies once** - so there is no such thing as "reincarnation" (cf. Hebrews 9:27).
- We also know that after dying we will **meet our Lord face to face** and receive **judgment**.
- And we know that if we die **in friendship with him**, we will spend eternity with him in **heaven**, though we may need to pass through **purgatory** first, to cleanse any leftover selfish tendencies that didn't get **purified** during our earthly life.
- And, finally, we know that if we die **outside** of God's friendship, he will not **force** us into his friendship after death, but will respect our decision. And in that case, eternal separation from God, also known as **hell**, will await us.

Jesus revealed all these things to us because he knew it would be **helpful** for us to know them.

- We are like Scrooge in Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*:
- God has **shown us the future**, so that we will **stop** making foolish, selfish, and destructive decisions in the **present**.
- It is not morose or morbid to think of death; it is morose, morbid, and unwise **not** to.

ILLUSTRATION: Fools and Shepherds (linked to Psalm)

We know at least **two things** about death.

First, we know that in some form or another **it will come for all of us**.

This is **obvious**, even though many people try to hide from it.

A few years ago in a small parish the priest was giving a **fire-and-brimstone** homily.

- At one point he said, "Some day **every member** of this parish will die!"
- Everyone in the congregation was stunned except one man who started **laughing** and then yelled back, "I don't belong to this parish!"
- Sometimes we can be like that - **foolishly** forgetting that humanity's mortality rate is holding steady at 100%.
- The great mass media baron, William Randolph Hearst, **forbade** anyone to ever use the word "death" in his presence.
- Such an intelligent and successful man, and yet so **stubborn** in refusing to face the truth.
- Contrast that to **Philip II of Macedon**, Alexander the Great's father, who commissioned a servant to approach him **daily** and solemnly announce, "Remember, Philip, **you must die.**"

That death comes for us all is obvious even to **non-Christians**.

But the **second thing** we know for sure about death was revealed only by Christ, namely, that every death is somehow **part of God's plan**.

- A shepherd in the highlands of **Scotland** lost a precious child to disease.
- He was **inconsolable**.
- A **neighboring** shepherd stopped at the bereaved home one evening and asked the heart-broken father to come with him out into the field.
- There the neighbor pointed to the flock of the soul-heavy father and said:
- "When you **select a lamb** from your flock, you choose the best and the most beautiful, don't you?"
- "Christ is the Good Shepherd of **all** of us. We belong to His flock.
- "When he wants a lamb he picks out the most **precious, beautiful, and innocent.**"

Every death is somehow **part of God's plan**; the Lord truly is our shepherd; he walks **beside** us even through the dark valley of death.

APPLICATION: Keeping Death in Mind

The Church **often** reminds us of this big picture, because she doesn't want us to give in to the natural, **unchristian tendency** to avoid thinking about death.

- The ever present **crucifix** is one of these reminders.
- One of the most common Catholic **prayers**, the Hail Mary, reminds us of death every time we pray it: "...Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and **at the hour of our death.** Amen."

- In every Mass we **pray for the deceased** - another reminder.

God doesn't want us to get to our deathbeds and **panic** - he wants us to **die well**.

- And dying well **doesn't mean** giving into the evil hopelessness and emptiness of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.
- No, dying well means dying **in Christ's arms**.
- And the surest way to die well is to **live well**.

And one sure way to **live well** is to **keep in mind** that we will die - not in an **obsessive** way, but in a Christian way:

- by visiting the **cemetery**, putting flowers on the graves of our relatives, and praying for them;
- by living closely the **rhythm of the Church's liturgy**, which reminds us gently but firmly that this brief life on earth is not all there is;
- by ministering to the **sick** and being attentive to the needs and wisdom of the **elderly**.

These simple, ancient Catholic traditions **enrich** our life-attitudes, relationships, and personal decisions with **compassion** and **truth**.

If we live them well, then when we find **our own death** knocking at the door, we will have **no regrets**, only **smiles**, both for the **beauty** we leave behind, and for the **Beauty** still in store.

In this Mass, as Christ fills us again with his **life** through the sacrament of his passion and resurrection, let's **thank** him for taking the sting out of **death**. 

