

The Last Things

Are you ready to die? In many ways we are surrounded by death, and yet we often resist thinking about our own death. Nevertheless, spiritual writers often encourage regular consideration of the end, “Memento mori,” they tell us, “Remember your death.” They say this not because they are overly morbid, but rather, because they know that a healthy appreciation for death tends to make for a better life. Consider the testimony of those who have had a brush with death, or those who have recovered from serious illness, often they live their lives more intentionally, knowing that every day is a gift. It is natural to have some fear of death, and yet for many, an excessive or unreasonable fear of death can be crippling. For believers, Death is the entrance into eternal life and the first of the “Four Last Things,” along with Judgment, Heaven and Hell.

Why do people fear death, or consider themselves not ready to die? Often the many violent and painful images of death that surround us trigger fear in us. It is understandable to have some fear of the unknown, and most of us cannot anticipate the nature of our own death, and yet those in dangerous professions, first responders, soldiers, and high school teachers prepare each day for all the things that could kill them, and by their preparation for death, live to fight another day. Those who receive a terminal diagnosis are sometimes given the time to prepare for death, and the result can often be quite beautiful and peaceful. The way in which we prepare for death often has a great deal to do with how well we live.

The consideration of death need not be feared nor avoided. Though death was not part of God’s plan for us, and is an unfortunate consequence of Original Sin, it is not the worst thing, and in light of the Resurrection, we can hope that we too will rise again. “Memento mori,” let us remember our death and prepare for its coming by living as disciples who anticipate the eternity that it promises.

“Enjoy your youth,” is the wisdom often given by our elders. And in our society there seems to be an obsession with preserving it. We are forever looking for more time and lamenting that time “flies by” too quickly. There never seems to be enough time, and yet we are destined for eternity. But instead of trying to figure out just how long eternal life will last, we recognize that God created time and has given us a share of it in order to use it to learn to love, and so prepare for a “time” when we will not be so bound by it. God created time and is therefore not subject to it. He is “outside” of time and for Him all time is “now.” He has no beginning and no end, there was never a “time” when He was not. We have been created by God and have been placed in time, there is a “time” that we were not, but we will live forever. We have a beginning and

no end. Our “eternal” life will not be so much “endless” time, but a different experience of time.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the end rather bluntly, “it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the Judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27) Judgment is the second of the “Four Last Things” and, according to Scripture, we should anticipate two judgments. The Particular Judgment, as referenced above in Hebrews, comes for each individual immediately after death, perhaps something akin to the description of those who have had a “near death” experience and “saw my whole life flash before my eyes,” or the stories of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates reading the account of our life. The Particular Judgment determines our eternal destiny, either in God’s presence in Heaven, with a possible stop in Purgatory, or separated from God in Hell. The “Final” or “General” Judgment takes place at the end of time when Jesus returns in glory. It is described by St. Matthew in the story of the sheep and the goats, “When did we see you hungry and feed you?” (Matthew 25:31-46)

Consider that the Judgment is like a test. The test provides us the opportunity to demonstrate our mastery, and the good student, like the good athlete, looks forward to the opportunity to be tested. The test also provides motivation to prepare, and while it is nice to think of a school experience that did not have any tests, most of us would admit that we would not have learned nearly as much if we were never tested. And so it is with the Judgment, it need not be feared by the one who prepares for it, and the prospect of Judgment provides an important motivation to prepare. God is not waiting for the opportunity to make us look bad, or even to punish us, He is simply hoping that we prepare well for the life that He has in store for us, a life that, like anything else that is worth doing, requires a certain preparation. For us, that preparation is the life of Charity, for above all else, we will be judged on how we love.

Part 2:

If we are going to be tested, it would be helpful if we knew what to study. “What is going to be on the exam?” is the question asked by most students. If the final exam is the General/Final Judgment, Jesus has given us the questions for the exam in Matthew 25. We have a special name for His list, we call them the “Corporal Works of Mercy.”

Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, bury the dead. “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” We know the questions that He is going to ask, are you ready for the final exam? But the Corporal Works of Mercy are not to be understood as “pre-requisites” for Heaven, things we do to “earn” our place there. Rather, as we have seen above, we will be judged on our love, and the Works of

Mercy are the fruit of a life of charity, a good practical measure to help us determine whether our love is of a heavenly caliber. Heaven is not so much an award to be won, or a vacation to be earned, as it is the logical result of a life lived for God and others. It is an imitation of the life of the God who became one of us to show us how it is done. The crucifix is perhaps our best image of what that kind of love looks like. It is not so much the image of cruel torture as it is the image of an extraordinary, even supernatural, kind of love, "I will love you, even if you do this to me." The Works of Mercy give us the opportunity to learn how they love in heaven, loving God, loving our neighbor, loving our roommates, siblings, brothers and sisters in need, and even our enemies. "For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:46)

Heaven is the third of the "Four Last Things" and has already been introduced as the logical result of a life of charity. We are made to love, and when anything is used for the purpose for which it was made, it is used well. When we accomplish the purpose for which we were made, happiness is the inevitable result. This is why we define Heaven as "the state of supreme and definitive happiness." (CCC 1024) Because Heaven is associated with happiness, we often explain it to the little ones in terms of those things which make them happy. For the child, there are few experiences that bring more anticipation and joy than the annual pilgrimage to an amusement park never develops. We like God because He made it and He lets us in, but once there, we want to do our own thing. The amusement park analogy works if you remember that Heaven is not so much the endless roller coaster thrill, but rather eternity with the Beloved. And what makes you think that you will be happy in Heaven if you can't imagine spending more than an hour or so a week with Him now?

For those who are not interested in spending that much time with God, He has made another place, Hell, the fourth of the Four Last Things. Hell is freely chosen eternal separation from God. It exists. Jesus spent a fair amount of time warning us about it. "The gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many." (Matthew 7:13) But why would anyone choose Hell? People choose Hell for the same reason they choose themselves over God and others every day, because in Hell they get their own way.

God made us in His Image and He made us to love, but real love, though wonderful, is often quite demanding. Hell is not populated by only those who choose evil, but by those whose love of self closes them off to the needs of others and the invitation of God. The great Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis gets credit for the insight that Heaven and Hell are retroactive, in his allegory "The Great Divorce." Those destined for Heaven begin living it now, finding love, joy and peace in even the most difficult

situations. Those destined for Hell begin living it now, so wrapped up in themselves that they make themselves incapable of giving themselves to another. Hell exists. Avoid it by a commitment to resist every instance of selfishness that manifests itself in your life. God made us for communion with Him in Heaven for eternity. Death is our entrance into that state of supreme and definitive happiness. But that life begins now through our acceptance of His invitation, and a life of discipleship in Him. Memento mori, and seek out that “narrow path” as you anticipate the Master’s welcome, “Well done my good and faithful servant... come, share your master’s joy.” (Matthew 25:21)