

November A Time to Remember A Catholic Understanding of Death (2)

November is the month in which Catholics remember the dead. Last week, I wrote about the feast of All Saints and All Souls. Today, I write about the Mystery of Death.

Although there are many things we do not and cannot know in life, there is one thing we all know with absolute certainty. We know that each one of us, without exception, will die. Although we do not know when we will die or how we will die, we know that we are mortal; and because we are mortal we will die. Death is the last enemy, the great enemy, the enemy no one of us can escape. It is the enemy that reminds us of our profound need for God's grace and mercy.

For some people, death simply means the end of life, nothing more. In this view, when death occurs, there is no more life; there is no more existence. In this understanding of death, death is simply the end of our existence. In this understanding of death, all hope for life after death is illusory. For others, death has become a trivial event. They play video games in which people die without pain or sorrow or grief. They watch movies in which people are killed without thought. Life seems to be cheap and of no value. But when people who have trivialized death experience the death of someone they know, or when they are faced with the prospect of their own death, they do not know what to do or how to act. They do not understand the Mystery of Death.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that death is a mystery. Death is the last and great enemy that has the power to separate us from each other and from God. And so our death or the death of someone we love is a fearful prospect. Jesus experienced the frightful prospect of his own death in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve before he was put to death. And then, when he hung upon the cross, he cried out the opening words of Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

But the death of Jesus did not result in eternal separation from God. God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus' death became his entry into God's presence. The death of Jesus overcame the power that death has over us, and it has shown us once and for all that God's love is stronger than the power of death. For those who believe in Jesus death is a *mystery*, and through this mystery we enter into life. The funeral liturgy (about which I will write in a few weeks) speaks of death in this way:

***In him the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned,
that those saddened by the certainty of dying
might be consoled by the promise of immortality to come,
indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended.***

The Christian mystery of death is summarized in those final words, *life is changed not ended*. We, who are in Christ, still experience the full power and force of death. Like all human beings we are filled with fear in the face of death. But we also know that death is not the absolute end of our life. Rather, it is the moment when we are changed and transformed into a new way of being in God's presence. This is why, in our Christian faith, death is a mystery. It is our share and participation in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. In Christ, death has become the gateway to life.

Father Matera

***Please join us this Thursday, November 14th at 7:00 PM,
for our annual Memorial Mass for all who have died this past year.***