

The last enemy to be destroyed is death

1 Corinthians 15:26

A sermon for All Saints Sunday

Some years ago a pastor was giving a children's sermon and talking with the children about the fact that eventually we're all going to die. When he said that, one little boy shot his hand up and said: "I'm not going die!" The whole congregation laughed. That pint-size Prometheus was sure he'd find a way to escape death. Each of us has within us that pint-size Prometheus who says: "Yes, there's death, but somehow I'm going to escape it."

Then, even more important, what does death mean? What is it really about? About fifteen years ago a group of atheists in London paid for a sign on London buses that read: "There is probably no God. Stop worrying and enjoy this life."

That message, that there is no God, is nothing new. Already, this message that there is nothing beyond, is reflected in Isaiah 22:13: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." That's about 700 years before Christ. This verse from Isaiah is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:22. It was well known that there was a religion in the ancient world named Epicureanism. It was about the time of Alexander the Great, 300 B. C. He promoted the religion which is that everything is a matter of deciding by pleasure or pain. When you're dead, you're dead. There is no continuing of body or soul. There is no judgment. The whole world is made up of atoms which go on infinitely. This is also the modern point of view for many atheists.

In the states of Washington and Oregon only about 20% of the people have any connection to any religion. When people die, there are funeral homes with hired eulogists who lead a celebration of life service, talking about the person and what he or she did in life. But when it's over, it's over.

What do we say to that? In the history of the world what most religions understand there is life after death. The exception is Buddhism which is basically atheistic and then, of course, those who are atheistic, like the Epicureans.

When the British novelist Somerset Maugham died, he allegedly grabbed someone standing by his bedside and said: "Please assure me that there isn't any more." Because then it's all over.

Is it over or not? That is the big divide; it's a stark division. Actually, the divide is threefold. First of all, there are those who say: "If there is no God, there is nothing more." Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. It is illustrated by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, when the brother Ivan says: "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."

Everything is permitted but, as Epicureans said, you have to weigh the trade-offs between pleasure and pain: If you drink too much, you get a headache. The noted atheist Richard Dawkins put it strikingly: "The fool is the one who has religion, because all religion is against reason."

The second group is the vast number of religions of the world which say: "Yes there is something more, and what we have to do is deal with that." There is a well-known saying from the ancient world: "Remember your death." The fool is the one who doesn't remember that death is coming, and there is something more that has to be dealt with, the gods, or fate, or whatever.

In the third place we have the God of the Bible, the one who says: "I'm dealing with you and I'm dealing with what's going on." I am the one who is involved. In the Book of Psalms there are two psalms that are identical, Psalms 14 and 53. They start out saying: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" The fool is the one who makes "reason" God, but reason is broken, the Lord is Lord, and no one else. The one who denies that is the fool. Paul picks up on this in Romans 1:22: "claiming to be wise, they became fools."

As we celebrate this festival of All Saints Day and look at what it is about, we're not caught in some kind of morbid thinking or fear, although there is that startling place in Hebrews 10:31: "It is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the living God." But we then call upon our Christian hope. We think of our Christian hope as we think of those who have gone before and also of our own life and whatever is to come after that. There really are five things to keep in mind.

First, yes, the wages of sin is death (Roman 6:23), but in 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Second, one doesn't know when this is coming. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 Paul writes: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." This same picture is used five times in the New Testament, most strikingly in Revelation 3:3 which says that Christ "will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour. . . ."

Third, the answer is well stated by Luther in the sermon he preached at the death of his protector, Duke Fredrick the Wise, in 1526. Luther talked about the big death and the little death. The big death is the one that Christ died on Calvary, and it says in John 19:30: "It is finished." Yes, there is our own death, the little death, but that is put in perspective. What Luther is here doing is paraphrasing what it says in John 11:25-26 where Jesus says: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. . . ."

Fourth, yes, the Lord has taken care of things. He has taken care of things and we thank God because we could not deal with sin and death, but we can depend on him. As it says in Romans 14:9: "For to his end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the living and the dead."

Fifth and finally: How does that apply to you and me? In Romans 6:5 Paul writes: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Paul is talking about Baptism. In Baptism God rescues us from the jaws of the devil and gives us eternal life in his kingdom where sin, evil, and death are no more.

As we look at this past, present, and future, we have this certainty because of what he has done, and we can depend on him. Amen