

Now you need not fear the grave

Hebrews 2:14

Some Christian families have the tradition of having a Christmas cake as a birthday cake for the Christ child. One mother who does this writes on the frosting: "Joy to the World, the Lord Has Come!"

There is very little historical material about Christianity from the First Century, but what we know makes it certain that in the Jewish communities of the First Century, they did not celebrate birthdays. To be sure, they celebrated when a child was born.

The text in Hebrews 2 is puzzling. What is it assigned for today? It helps to look at this birthday question. It goes back to Matt 6:24: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." There's no intermediate position. You cannot say: I'll think about it. I'll have some of each. These are those that exclude each other. That's what it's all about.

There are several common "religions" of our day. They are not formal religions but belief systems that express how people think things happen. The first one is fatalism. Or fate. Luck, chance, destiny. It's in our language. We'll say: "Good luck." Or: "You can thank your lucky stars." Or: "That's fortunate," from the Latin god of chance, Fortuna. Some ask: "What's your sign?" Many are captivated by astrology, horoscopes, fortune tellers, and the like.

The key to all that is what some say about death. For example: "His number was up." Behind that is the idea that there is some kind of overarching fate that numbers our days. We're like little corks bobbing in the ocean. There really is no good or evil; there's nothing we can do about. In a way this view is comfortable because we can say there is nothing we could do; we couldn't help it.

Another such belief system is scientism, the belief that science is the only form of real knowledge. When we read the news, we notice that some words are capitalized to signal their importance. For example, the Big Bang is almost always capitalized. Sometimes Nature is capitalized, as is Reason. Or: "May the Force be with you," with a capital "F." In physics today when you read about it, you find out there are no more universals. Physics is at sea about what everything is finally.

An astrophysicist recently wrote an article in a respected journal in which he said: "I can tell you how the end of the world is coming. After seven billion years our sun will implode and then explode and that will take everything else with it."

About twenty-five years ago a different astrophysicist wrote a similar article although he wrote: "In four billion years the sun will implode." Will it be seven billion or four billion?

It's like that famous statement by the late Everett Dirksen: "A billion here, a billion there, pretty soon it adds up."

The point of it all is: What does the end mean for you and for me?

We hope there is something more. But we're like a drop of water in the ocean or a grain of sand on the beach. We hope there's some continuity in some way but not really very much and that's all.

The third kind of common or secular religion out there is: We don't know; it's all vanity. Finally everybody is dead, and when you're dead, you're dead. "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32) is a quote from Isaiah 22:13, written 740 B.C. The prophet condemns this worldview in which we sit high and look down in judgment. In this "religion" what is and what will be depends on how we think, how we figure it out.

Over against the common "religions" of our day stands our Christian confession: "You can't serve two masters. It's either one or the other." In our confession there are some specific things. First of all we say "one God." Then come the three parts. First of all, Creator. Creator of everything. Evolution is not a problem. Of course the Lord uses evolution as part of the way he does things. But he creates, as we confess, out of nothing. That means he creates nature, and he creates the cosmos, the ordering of things, over against chaos.

Secondly, the Lord is the one who saves. This is specifically over against death, over against the end, over against those views which say the world and our lives amount to nothing. Or: There might be a little bit of something. Or: All things are governed by a vague fate.

In 1 Cor 15:26 Paul writes: "The last enemy to be conquered is death." Death is the enemy. It is not some sort of neutral thing. Second, in 15:56: "The sting of death is sin." The cause of death is sin. Paul has already said that in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." Hebrews 2:14 states: "that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death. . . ." Over against all those other points of view, the cross is the victory, the conquest over death. Death has been defeated.

Isaiah 65:25 states: "And the lion will eat straw." Imagine that. The Lord can take care of all these things. God's future, God's coming kingdom is not subject to the limitations of this world.

In the third place our Creed states: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the sustainer, the one who cares for us and keeps things going. Already in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 23:11, the Lord says: "I have a plan for you, a future, and a hope." 1 Peter 5:7 reads: "Cast all your cares on him for he cares about you." In Phil 4:19: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

In the sixth chapter of Matthew where we find the text: "You cannot serve two masters. . . ." it goes on to say: If the Lord takes care of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, do you think he doesn't care even more for you?

Some people will object saying: "That's all interpretation. And things can be interpreted other ways." But there is the Creed and this Creed is a universal Creed. In Brazil there are over a hundred million Catholics who are Pentecostal and hold to what is called the Prosperity Gospel, that is, if you are an earnest Christian, you'll become rich.

When we talk about the Creed, we're talking about 90% of the Christians of the world.

Others will object saying: "Everybody is saved anyway." The universal church in 553 A.D. at the Council of Constantinople said "No" to universalism as a way of approaching Christianity.

Of course, you can always find some group of Christians who say whatever.

Finally to come back to the birthday cake. The reason that today we find so much emphasis on horoscopes and astrology corresponds to the decline of Christianity. It goes to prove what G. K Chesterton said: "When people stop believing in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything."

Finally we come back to what it is about. We sing: "Joy to the world" because as Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:54-55: "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? And then it goes in 1 Cor 15:56: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

That what it says in Hebrews 2:14: ". . . that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death. . . ."

Therefore we sing joy: "Good Christian friends rejoice, With heart and soul and voice; Now ye need not fear the grave; Jesus Christ was born to save!" Amen