

13th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (June 27, 2021)

That first reading from Wisdom and this gospel force us to confront one of the ultimate mysteries of life: the mystery of death. Why do we live; why do we exist at all? Obviously we were conceived by and born from our parents, but the larger question remains: what is the origin of life? There is only one possible and ultimate answer: God himself. Science can help us learn how life developed and evolved throughout the ages, but it can't explain how life and living beings began to exist in the first place. Genesis teaches us that God is the ultimate creator and origin of everything—all life, especially our own, we who he made 'the image of his own nature' as we heard in that first reading.

So then why do we die; where did death come from? Since God is the author of life, some think that God is also the cause of death; we may hear people say things like "why did God take my loved one?" or we may try to console someone by saying "God must have wanted/needed your loved one in heaven." But that's not the case; this Wisdom reading is very clear: "God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living." It goes on to say that "God formed man to be imperishable"—he made us for life, and for life without end. But death is real: not by the desire or will of God, but "by the envy of the devil". Sin is the culprit here; as our Catechism says: "God had destined [man] not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin" (n. 1008).

Death is not a pleasant thing. It can be hard to think or talk about; we are reluctant to even speak the words 'death' or 'dying' and talk instead of someone 'passing' or 'passing away'. And when we have to confront death up close and personal, it's really, really hard...especially it hits unexpectedly like the proverbial bolt out of the blue. I'm guessing that many of you have faced that special sadness; that was the case with the death of both of my parents in the late 1980's. You remember your former pastor Fr. Ray Atwood; earlier this month his sister Linette died unexpectedly at the age of 50. His address is in today's bulletin in case you'd like to send him a note or sympathy card.

As Christians, of course, we have the great blessing of knowing that death is not the last chapter of our story. We are Christians because we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who rose from the dead and has destroyed forever the lasting power of death. He showed his power over death even in his earthly life—today's gospel tells of Jesus raising that 12-year-old girl from the dead. We also remember Jesus raising his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. And most of all we know the great Easter truth and joy of Jesus' own resurrection. He has promised us a share in his conquest of death; that's why in a few moments we will again declare in the Creed that we "look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

But...it's still hard, isn't it? Of course it is, especially when the death of a loved one or our own terminal illness or condition forces us to confront this 'death-thing' head on. So what do we do; how do we handle it? The bottom line: we hang onto Jesus Christ with every fiber of our being. The more that Jesus is a real Person for us, the more we connect with him and live for and with him—both in our personal and individual relationship and through and with his Church and his sacraments—the more we do that, the less we will fear death and the better we will be able to confront it when we can't avoid it.

On the other hand, if our primary focus in life is the pursuit of earthly or material goals, then coming face to face with the inevitability of death can feel like a real sucker punch. Steve Jobs was the billionaire CEO of Apple, Inc. who died ten years ago of pancreatic cancer at the age of 56. Near the end of his life he said “I reached the pinnacle of success in the business world. In other eyes, my life is an epitome of success. However, aside from work, I have little joy. I realized that all the recognition and wealth I accumulated and took so much pride in have paled in the face of impending death.” Very sobering words indeed. Again from our Catechism: “...remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment” (n. 1007). We can hope and pray that those insights led Mr. Jobs to realize where genuine peace and lasting joy could be found. We don’t know the state of his soul when he died, but we can and should pray for the blessed repose of his soul—that is a powerful spiritual work of mercy.

It really does boil down to faith in Jesus. The woman with the hemorrhages in the gospel had that faith: “if only I can touch his cloak, I’ll be cured”. She did, and she was...and Jesus declared that it was her faith that saved her. He also encouraged the synagogue official whose daughter had died to “just have faith”...and Jesus brought her back to life. So what do we mean by ‘faith’? It does not simply mean that if we believe a certain proposition, then we will automatically get what we want according to our terms and preferences. ‘Faith’ doesn’t mean that we will be always be unburdened by sadness or confusion. Pope Francis puts it this way: “Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey. To those who suffer, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, his response is that of an accompanying presence, a history of goodness which touches every story of suffering and opens up a ray of light.”

The risen Christ, the One who has conquered death once and for all and forever, is that lamp that leads and guides and strengthens us through our grief and pain, our confusion and tears—all of which he himself experienced. Faith is basically: “Jesus, I am with you and I want to be with you. Please be my lamp, my guide, my hope. Help me remember your constant presence and never-ending love.” That is what he is waiting for, what he wants to respond to with his grace and peace that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Let’s take him up on his most generous offer; let’s do it every day—and he will strengthen us to face everything that life throws at us...even death itself.