Faith, Fear and Death

A common soldier dies without fear; Jesus died afraid. Iris Murdoch wrote those words which, I believe, help expose an over-simplistic notion we have of how faith reacts in the face of death. There's a popular notion that believes that if we have strong faith we should not suffer any undue fear in the face of death. We may think that those who have nothing to fear from God have nothing to fear from the afterlife. Christ has overcome death. Death sends us to heaven. So why be afraid?

This is, in fact, the case for many women and men, some with faith and some without it. Many people face death with very little fear. Of course there are many of us who have stood at the deathbed of people who will never be canonized but who faced their death calm and unafraid.

So why was Jesus afraid? And it appears he was. Three of the Gospels describe Jesus as far from calm and peaceful, as visiting a place of “Gethsemane” or “Gethsemane.” Buckley's conclusion can leave us perplexed. Socrates seems to face death more courageously than Jesus does.

For example, like Jesus, Socrates was also unjustly condemned to death. But he faced his death with calm, completely. He was able to turn to his students, provide the counsel he was known for, and then calmly receive a sentence of death. In the moments of his death, he was calm; but, in the moments before, there was a time of awful anguish within which he felt himself abandoned by God.

If one does not consider the inner complexities of faith, the paradoxes it contains, it makes no sense that Jesus, particularly those who are the most faithful, have to undergo a trial that the mystics call a dark night of the soul.

What's a dark night of soul? It's a God-given trial in life wherein we, much to our own surprise and anguish, can no longer think about God. While in reality this is actually an overpowering light, it is felt as darkness, anguish, fear, and doubt. And so we might expect that our journey towards death and our face-to-face encounter with God might also involve the loss of the ways we have always thought about and felt about God. And that will bring doubt, darkness, and fear in our lives.

Henri Nouwen gives a powerful testimony to this in speaking about his mother's death. His mother had been a woman of deep faith, and her last prayer was “the prayer of the mystics.” She was of the opinion that her life was consecrated to the work of the church, and her last prayer was that she would be with her mother in heaven: “I want to be there for you.”

A common soldier dies without fear; Jesus died afraid. And so, paradoxically, do many women and men of faith.
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