

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 26th 2016

On Good Friday, there was no Eucharist - simply a communion service, with the Body of Christ from the Holy Thursday Eucharist. On Holy Saturday, there is no liturgy at all. The liturgy this evening is the vigil - the preparation for and entry into the celebration of Our Lord's Resurrection. It is an Easter Sunday liturgy.

On Holy Saturday we enter into the mystery. Today we contemplate Jesus, there in the tomb, dead. In that tomb, he is dead, exactly the way each of us will be dead. We don't easily contemplate dying, but we rarely contemplate being dead. I have had the blessed experience of being with a number of people who have died, of arriving at a hospital shortly after someone has died, of attending an autopsy, and of praying with health sciences students over donated bodies in gross anatomy class. These were powerful experiences because they all brought me face-to-face with the mystery of death itself. With death, life ends. Breathing stops, and in an instant, the life of this person has ended. And, in a matter of hours, the body becomes quite cold and life-less - dramatic evidence, to our senses, that this person no longer exists. All that is left is this decaying shell that once held his or her life.

Death is our ultimate fear. Everything else we fear, every struggle we have, is some taste of, some chilling approach to, the experience of losing our life. This fear is responsible for so much of our lust and greed, so much of our denial and arrogance, so much of our silly clinging to power, so much of our hectic and anxiety-driven activity. It is the one, inevitable reality we all will face. There is not enough time, money, joy, fulfillment, success. Our physical beauty and strength, our mental competency and agility, all that we have and use to define ourselves, slip away from us with time. Our lives are limited. Our existence, in every way we can comprehend it, comes to an end. We will all die. In a matter of time, all that will be left of any of us is a decomposing body.

Today is a day to soberly put aside the blinders we have about the mystery of death and our fear of it. Death is very real and its approach holds great power in our lives. The "good news" we are about to celebrate has no real power in our lives unless we have faced the reality of death. To contemplate Jesus' body, there in that tomb, is to look our death in the face, and it is preparation for hearing the Gospel with incredible joy. That we are saved from the ultimate power of sin and of death itself comes to us as a great relief, as a tremendous liberation. If Jesus lives, you and I will live! The mystery of death, which we contemplate today, will be overcome - we will live forever!

Today's reflection will lead us to the vigil of Easter. This night, communities from all over the world will gather in darkness, a darkness that represents all that we have been reflecting upon today.

The God who created us, who led a chosen people out of slavery, raised Jesus from death. We can rejoice that death has no final victory over us. Then we celebrate the Easter Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Tonight we celebrate our faith -- that we have been baptized into the death of Jesus, so that we might have everlasting life with him.

As we behold the body of Jesus in the tomb today, and as we contemplate the mystery of our death, we prepare our hearts to receive the Good News of life. We know that tomb will be empty and remain empty forever as a sign that our lives will not really end, but only be transformed. One day, we will all rest in the embrace of Jesus, who knows our death, and who prepares a place for us in everlasting life.

Our reflection on this holy Saturday, and our anticipation of celebrating the gift of life tonight and tomorrow, can bring immense peace and joy, powerful freedom and vitality to our lives. For if we truly believe that death holds no true power over us, we can walk each day with courage and freedom, in the grace being offered us - to give our lives away in love.

Brothers and sisters:

Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection.

Rom 6:3-11

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