

Sermon for Third after Easter, 2021

Isaiah 25:1 & 6-9. Colossians 3: 1-11. Psalm 66:1-5&7.
John 14:1-11.

The Collect: Living Father, who has given thine only Son to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life: grant that in him we may faithfully seek thee, joyfully find thee and for ever possess thee, God blessed for ever. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Isaiah 25:7 ‘And he will destroy on this mountain, the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.’

[Yeshayah 25:7 (Orthodox Jewish Bible) And He will destroy in Har Hazeh the pnei hallot (the face of the covering, the [death] shroud) cast over all people, and the masseikhah (overspreading veil) over Kol HaGoyim.]

During this season we are mindful of the Resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead. It’s a time to be encouraged and for Christians to rejoice. However, I recently read of a woman from Pontypool who had been discharged home from ten weeks in hospital after contracting Covid. The ambulance crew tucked her up in bed and left. Unfortunately, it was the wrong bed, and the wrong house! She had been left at a stranger’s home in Newport. If you think that’s bad enough: a 20 year old woman woke up in a morgue in Michigan recently, just before they were about to perform the embalming process. And, furthermore, it isn’t unusual! People have been refrigerated for days after assumed death, and lived to tell the tale. If that’s not enough to cheer you up, why not read ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ tonight?

Isaiah speaks into the future that, after the Babylonian Exile of 597BC, the Jewish People will return to Mount Zion, which itself will have been reduced from beauty to ashes; figuratively dead, with a shroud thrown over it. Yet, Yahweh will lead them back home and remove the shroud. But, notice that in the verse cited above, there is an example of Hebrew poetic emphasis (called parallelism). Namely, a theme is repeated with similar words so as to emphasise the single underlying point. In this instance the veil/shroud is cast over all peoples/nations. Thus, nobody has escaped death, and none will be left outside a bountiful and sumptuous feast. That is a great promise.

This is a very dramatic image of God’s restoration of *all* people to joyful life. Restoration did come to the Exiles; though Jerusalem was again destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, and exile amongst the Gentiles occurred for many of the Jews. Through Jesus, even Gentiles can be grafted in to God’s beloved company. But, let us be frank: a veil still covers the eyes of many people, whether they are of God’s particular historic people or the rest of us. So, there is a state of mourning that has not yet been lifted. Psalm 42:5 reads:

‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.’

Human sorrow can feed unhealthily on the idea of death. Bereavement can starve itself on junk food! But, St Paul turns this on its head in Colossians 3:3 when he writes: 'For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.' Jesus, tells us: 'Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.' (Notice the emphatic Jewish parallelism again, God=Jesus). He tells the Apostles, who had been bereft and distraught after the crucifixion, that during mortal life, before they come to heaven, they must follow His way - the true way of living - until He comes to collect them.

I haven't had an out-of-the-body experience, though I have had a near-death one on a couple of occasions. One was very pleasant! Some of you already know what happened. And the result of them has been to reassure me about the life to come. It's only human to worry about dying. Some are really terrified of it. I'd like to know what the young woman who woke up in the morgue thought? Victorians were so scared they were sometimes buried with a bell (to sound the alarm if they woke up in the grave). However, there are numerous video-clips of people who claim to have had near death out of the body experiences, and they seem to fall into roughly two categories: those who would never again be worried about actual death happening, and those who were absolutely terrified. Actually, there are some such who mend their ways in this life (including converting to Christianity) in order to be judged favourably after death.

So, sentient creatures are aware of their own mortality. None of us can afford to be relaxed about it to the extent that we pretend it is not going to happen; nor should we hope for the best and take no time for preparation. In the sacrament of the Mass, I will say the words of our Saviour, which include: 'Drink ye all of this, for this is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.' He shed His blood for us, that we might have confidence to live this life without fear, and to be redeemed for the next. The paradox is that the believer knows they are going to die, and breathes a sigh of relief. We can only do this without self-deception or terror because we have died to self whilst encumbered by our earthly body. We recognise it for what it is, namely, a mode of transport for the soul. Philippians 1:21 tells us: 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.'

That is why we Christians can look at death, and live. Alleluya, Christ is Risen!

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.