

There is a haunting story about a wealthy merchant in Baghdad
who sent his servant to the marketplace one morning.

There the servant saw the figure of death moving among the people.
Death seemed to look at him very menacingly
and the servant became panic-stricken.

Rushing home, he begged his master to give him a horse
to escape death by fleeing to the city of Samarra.

The merchant had pity on his servant
and gave him his fastest white Arabian steed,
and the servant immediately galloped off for Samarra.

Later that day, the merchant himself went to the marketplace
where he, too, saw the vision of death.

He approached the figure and asked him
why he had stared so threateningly at his servant that morning.

“That was not a threatening look,” Death replied.

“It was a look of surprise.

I was surprised to see that man in the city of Baghdad
since I have an appointment with him tonight
in the city of Samarra.”

Death is often a pretty terrifying thought--
especially when it is our own death we are thinking about.

But in the text this morning,
Jesus tries to put death into some kind of perspective
by talking about it in two ways:
First, about physical dying;
and second, about sacrificial dying.

In speaking of the first kind of dying--physical death—
Jesus uses much the same language that St. Paul uses in saying
that a person is like a grain of wheat which,
unless it is put into the ground and dies,
cannot become a stalk or plant.

This analogy compares our present body
and our life now to the grain of wheat. . .
and compares our resurrection body
and the life to come as the stalk or plant.

In this way, both Paul and Jesus are trying to help us see and understand
that physical death--although it seems to be the end--
is really a necessary transition or step on our journey
toward our becoming all that we were meant to be
which is people who live now and forever in the presence of God.

I read an intriguing article on BBC this past week
of the recent death of the Zulu King who had reigned for 50 years.
It caught my attention because, in the Zulu language,
people are not “buried” but “planted”.

For that reason, although there was considerable mourning and loss,
there was also a celebration of thanksgiving for the King’s life
because the benefits of his rule will continue to flower and flourish
under the watchful care of the new king who will inherit the throne.

However, having said all of that about seeds and stalks and planting,
I suspect that physical death was not the only point
nor even the main point that Jesus wants to bring out
in using this image of a grain of wheat dying and then rising.

You see, although he is speaking to his disciples about his approaching death,
he is also talking to them about being willing
to let the things of this world die
in order to grab hold of what is really important.

And what is most important, he says,
is a relationship of love and trust--
a relationship in which we believe with all our heart
that he loves us more than his own life
and that we can trust him above all else.

And when we think about it, he’s right
about that relationship with him being the most important.

After all, when we look closely at the various things in life
 that we and most other people in the world consider important--
 things like security and safety, the acceptance of others,
 health, wealth, and ample creature comforts—
 when we look closely at such things,
 we quickly realize that none of them can really do anything
 to prevent the end of life or the arrival of death.

An early morning fire. . . a skidding car on a rainy street. . .
 a lump in the breast, a teenager selling fentanyl in a schoolyard. . .
 a virus so small it can't be seen with the naked eye,
 a madman with his finger on a bomb, as in the case in Atlanta,
 on the trigger of a gun that killed 6 Asian women--

any one of those and countless others can come along
 and our comfortable old life. . . our safe old life. . .
 collapses like a house of cards, leaving us, our families,
 our society, and, as we have learned over this past year,
 can leave even our world living in fear of or under the threat of death.

Thus, it seems to me that one of the points Jesus is making in today's Gospel
 is that only by giving up what the world counts as important
 can or will we ever find true security and safety and acceptance. . .
 because only when we take the risk
 of emptying our hands of this world's riches
 can he ever fill our hands with his gifts of grace. . .
 or take hold of our hands in his and lead us to new life with him.

Now, I suspect that some of you may not agree
 with that interpretation or conclusion and that you think
 this whole idea is nothing more than old-time religion—
 nothing more than hocus-pocus, mumbo-jumbo.

But ask yourselves these questions:
 Can the approval of your friends keep you from dying?
 Can a house or land or fat savings accounts
 restore a broken relationship with a rebellious child
 who wants nothing more to do with you?

Can a new car, a larger camper or faster boat,
 an exotic holiday, a new outfit, or an expensive face or bum lift
 patch up a fractured marriage or a lost friend or friendship?

And if we all agree that they cannot, then why do we spend
 so much time and energy trying to pretend that they can. . .
 trying to hold on so tightly to what, one day,
 will run through our fingers like sand. . .
 or turn into dust at the bottom of our coffins. . .
 or leave the bitter taste of ashes in our mouths
 when yet another dream dies. . .or another venture or adventure fails?

Why do we as individuals or families, as churches or societies
 try and build futures on foundations that are shifting and unstable--
 on foundations as subject to decay and rot as we ourselves are? Why?

Well, I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because we are afraid of the future,
 afraid of the unknown and so try so hard to control whatever we can
 in order to quell that fear. . .or damp down that sense of dread.
 Or maybe it is because we doubt God's willingness or ability
 to take care of us and provide for our needs as God promises.

Or maybe it is because we are too proud of ourselves—
 too much in love with ourselves and our own sense of self-reliance--
 and therefore want too much to be like God
 and make our own decisions about what is best for us
 based on our own self-interests and personal desires.

I don't know what the answer is, but what I do know
 is that no matter what that driving force is that whips us
 into the frantic search for a slice of the good life. . .
 and for the security and safety, acceptance and comfort
 that the good life seems to promise--
 whatever that driving force might be,
 it is important to recognize two things about it:

First of all, as Martin Luther put it in his catechism:
 Whatever we depend on and rely on in time of trouble is, in fact, our God;
 and second, before we can find the real God and live
 that false god has to die.

In other words, we need to be ready and willing
 to let that idol be cast down. . .and to turn away from
 the phony and empty promises it tempts us with
 if we are ever to find out what life was really meant to be like—
 what it means to live freely, joyfully, gratefully and generously.

To live like that, Jesus says, means to die—to let our false “self”
 and everything that props up this “false self”—
 the only way to let it die is to let God put it. . .put us. . .to death.

And where that happens is in Holy Baptism--
 not only in the understanding of Baptism as that action of God
 which took place once-long-ago, but also in the understanding of baptism
 as a dying and rising that happens each and every day.

In that holy water-washing, we believe, teach and confess, as does St. Paul,
 that we are crucified with Christ and die with him. . .
 and that we are raised with Christ to live with him, live in him,
 and so share his new life in the Spirit.

And what that means is that today, and day after day, every day,
 the Holy Spirit calls us to return to our baptisms. . .
 to return to our baptismal dying and rising through daily confession and repentance
 and then to be born again. . .born anew. . .
 through the promise of forgiveness and mercy.

And then, recreated, renewed and reborn by that assurance of grace,
 we begin living a new day. . .a new life--the life of Christ. . .
 our life “in” Christ. . .“with” Christ. . .and “as” Christ

Jesus put it this way: "Whoever loves their own life will lose it,
 but whoever hates their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal."

Now, I grant you that sounds like a rather frightening picture--
 like a tall and demanding order to fulfill:
 To die with Christ in order to live for Christ. . .
 to die to self in order to live for others.

And it is true that such a life. . .such a calling. . .will not only involve
 some heavy-duty trust but some pretty serious soul-searching as well
 in order to discover what is truly important to us
 and then trying to put what we learn into some kind of perspective.

A young woman off at university emailed the following letter to her parents--
 her first in three months of not hearing from her.

"Dear Mum and Dad, I'm sorry it has been so long since my last email
 but I didn't want you to worry about the fire in my dormitory
 and the concussion I got when I fell out the window trying to escape.
 I've been anxious to tell you about that nice motorcyclist
 with the tattoos and the earrings
 who made me feel comfortable until the ambulance arrived.

I'm out of the hospital now and feeling fine--
 especially since my new friend let me stay with him at his apartment
 while they are fixing the dormitory.

It is such a nice place and, although he looks rather mean and scruffy,
 he is a very fine person and I like him very much. . .
 and I know how happy it will make you
 to find out you are going to be grandparents.

In closing, let me tell you that you can stop worrying. There was no fire;
 I didn't fall out the window; there was no concussion;
 I haven't moved into anyone's apartment; there is no man in my
 life; and you are not going to be grandparents.
 I only told you those things because I got a "D" in biology
 and a failing grade in English literature
 and I wanted you to put them into perspective."

Security or health or friends, a comfortable life, a sense of safety
 are not bad things to have or to want.

What can make them destructive. . .what can turn them into idols. . .
 is the enormous price we pay to try and satisfy them—
 whether it be sacrificing ourselves or those we love
 in order to get what we want. . .
 or the compromises of our beliefs and principles
 we make in order to keep what we have.

Today's Gospel calls us to put the things
 we consider important in life into perspective. . .
 and then, to be prepared to choose:

To choose between having them or God in first place in our hearts;
 to choose between a life of frustration or despair, on the one hand,
 at never being able to find happiness or contentment
 because of never being able to have enough of what we hunger for. . .
 or, on the other hand, to choose the way of Christ--
 the way of service to others and dying to self--
 the way that brings life to others and new life to us.

So, let me close now by asking you to ponder these questions
 for the remaining two weeks of Lent:

What is it in your life that needs to end
 if Christ's life can begin or continue to grow stronger?

What is it in your life that needs to be rejected or turned away from
 so that the call to follow the way of the cross can be accepted and taken up?

What is it in your life that needs to be put aside
 so that a relationship of love and trust in Jesus Christ
 can take its place. . .its rightful place?

Clearly, these are not easy questions. . .
 but then this Lord we follow never promised us an easy way.
 He only promised us that dying is the way to life--
 to real life. . .to the life we really want. . .
 to the only life that is really worth dying for.

Amen. SDG