

The Death of Death

Like the Season of Christmas, which lasts a number of weeks, from Christmas Day through the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord, Easter is a season consisting of fifty days. This extended reflection on the mystery of the Risen Lord involves listening to the Scriptures of his Resurrection Appearances unto his Ascension and the way these events give way to the emergence of the Church.

The transformation of the Apostles during this period is remarkable. They go from being obtuse, petty, impulsive and cowardly followers to bold, wise, zealous and brave in their proclamation of the Risen One. The Resurrection encounters combined with the gifts of the Holy Spirit all but erase fear from their minds and hearts. Death has become meaningless.

In this regard, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that *“A life shaped by death actually becomes the proof of authenticity for Christian existence, even if a gleam of eternal life shines through this dying.”* Indeed, we discern this attitude in such passages as Phillipians 1:21 wherein St. Paul says *“To me life is Christ, and death is gain.”*

Faith would not be what it is if we knew exactly what to expect upon our own dying. In general terms, we expect judgment leading to some final disposition in Heaven or Hell. Both of these possible destinies are quite unimaginable in their joy and horror, respectively. The only life we really know is this one! So, it seems perfectly normal or natural that we have anxiety and/or fear about dying. Few people are cavalier about the topic: Its too powerful and it causes great pain by attacking the one's we love and our own physical being in the world.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus seems to permit our anxiety and fear by disclosing his own version of these. He prays that, *“if it is possible, this cup pass from me,”* (Mt. 26:39). But, immediately, he qualifies this request with *“Not my will, but your will be done.”* Clearly, in his fully human nature, Jesus knew the attachment we have to this life as the only type of which we have any experience. If there were shame or embarrassment about this apparent balking at death it would not be included in the Gospel narrative. Seemingly, therefore, the Lord wants us to know that he really does

understand our trepidation. Still, he yields to the will of the Father and receives ultimate vindication in the miracle of the Resurrection. The will of the Father is not a passage around, under or over death, but through it in such a way that it no longer remains what it was. In a paraphrase of something said by one preacher this past weekend, *“the tomb becomes more like a womb:”* it is a place of transit into a new life.

Of course, this seems to be too good to be true. But the Universe in which we live seems too good to be true as well: The chances of it being as fine tuned as it is to create stars supportive of biological life are like firing a random shot from a gun at a one-inch target at a distance of 20 billion light years and getting a bull's eye. Too good to be true is not confined to religion. Moreover, if we take seriously our own experiences of self-transcendence, we detect something that markedly differentiates us from all other creatures in this world. We, seemingly, have souls too big for our own material confines, including our bodies and our planet. Our plans, aspirations, projects and achievements encompass universes and the eternal.



Even biologists on the cutting edge of their discipline seem to think that bodily life ought to be sustainable with tweaks to the right chemicals and forces. Death, to them, seems to be a matter of design flaws in the biological machinery.

But, our Christian alternative does not involve a mere continuation in the same organic bodies, on the same rocky planet orbiting the same nuclear fusion star. St. Paul speaks of the “resurrection body” as *“sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorified. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.”* (1 Corinthians 42-44)

Our belief all comes down to a sense that there is much more than meets the eye about this life and that Jesus has pulled back the veil to give us a glimpse of that which is, in this moment, too overwhelming for us to receive. We must be prepared for it by a life of prayer and faith.