

20. Eternal Life

A Christian funeral is a solemn but not a gloomy occasion. The violet vestments and sad music fit in with the mood of the mourners, who naturally grieve at the loss of a dear one. But the main note in the liturgy is one of quiet hope, and even joy, at the thought of the happiness which awaits the good. St. Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are not to grieve over the dead as do those who have no hope, "for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4, 14). Death is an entrance into rest and the beginning of a fuller life in Christ.

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Rest in Peace

The Mass of the dead is called a Requiem, which means "rest". The words of the Liturgy express this well, *"Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them."* *"May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen."* The letters R.I.P. carved on tombstones are the first letters of the Latin prayer. *"Requiescat in pace ---- May he rest in peace."*

Yet this rest is not inactivity. It is rest from struggling, anxiety and grief. For the good man the end of earthly life is the beginning of a fuller and more vigorous life with God.

The Raising of Lazarus

As the coffin is lowered into the grave, the priest sprinkles it with Holy Water, saying: "I am the resurrection and the life." These words were spoken by Christ on the occasion when he raised Lazarus from the dead. This is described in the eleventh chapter of St. John's Gospel.

The two sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, sent a message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Jesus did not come immediately and Lazarus had been dead four days when he arrived. Martha said: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus replied: "Your brother will rise again." She said: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Then Jesus spoke these sublime words"

**"I am the resurrection and the life;
he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives
and believes in me shall never die."**

They went to the tomb and Jesus asked that it should be opened. Martha told him that the body would now be corrupt. Nevertheless, the grave was opened

and Jesus cried out: "Lazarus, come out." And he who had been dead came out (John 11, 1-44).

Christ gives eternal life

Jesus worked this miracle chiefly to demonstrate his power to give life---eternal life. This was the purpose of his coming into the world. He said to Nicodemus: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3, 16).

The raising of Lazarus is an illustration of his words quoted in the fifth chapter of St. John.

"For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5, 26-29).

Resurrection in Christ

Christ rose from the dead. All united to him will rise with him. He sends his Spirit into all who believe in him, and those who have his Spirit dwelling within them when their earthly life ends will rise with him.

St. Paul returns frequently to this theme. For example, in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans he says: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies" (Rom. 8, 11). In the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians he writes: "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." He goes on to state triumphantly that this faith is not in vain: "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead." Hence death for the Christian true to Christ has no terrors. "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor. 15, 12-58).

Yet the death of the just prompts serious thoughts, for after death comes judgment. As Christ says, "those who have done good will come forth to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."

The Judgment

All men are judged at the moment of death. "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebr. 9, 27). This judgment is not like a trial in a court of Law. There is no need for Lawyers to discover the facts and speak for the defence or prosecution. At death a man passes out of the shadows of ignorance and self-deception into the light of God. Then he sees himself as he really is. He sees how he has offended God and his neighbour, and how he has failed to live up to the standards God set for him. All faults are revealed in God's light, as specks of dust are revealed in a sunbeam. Those who love God yet are sinful cannot bear this light and shrink from it in pain. Those who love evil hate the light and flee from it. St. John in his third chapter tells how Christ described the judgment.

"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (John 3, 19-21).

There are some who die firm friends of God, loving the light. They were cleansed during their life through the sacrifice of Christ and the prayers, sufferings and good deeds they offered up in union with that sacrifice. These will enter immediately into the glory of God's presence and be happy with him for ever. But most of the good are not wholly good at death. There is darkness in them as well as light. There is uncleanness in them as well as purity. St. John says of the heavenly city that "nothing unclean shall enter it" (Rev. 21, 27). They will thank God that after death there is an opportunity for them to be purified, as gold is purged of dross in the furnace. The place of purification is called Purgatory.

Purgatory

Even before the coming of Christ God's people knew that the dead would have to make amends for their sins, and that those on earth could help them by prayer and sacrifices. The twelfth chapter of the second Book of Machabees tells how Judas Machabeus, the pious Jewish general, collected a large sum of money to have sacrifices offered in the Temple for those of his soldiers who had fallen in battle. The sacred author says: "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 Mach. 12, 46). This book is classified by Protestants as apocryphal, that is, good and useful for instruction but not having the same authority as the other books of the Bible. But the Church since the days of the Apostles has always classed it as truly part of the Bible and as much the Word of God as the rest. It certainly gives us the teaching of God's people before the coming of Christ.

Christ in his Church has given us fuller knowledge of how the dead are purified. They are cleansed through suffering.

The Suffering of Purgatory

The chief suffering of Purgatory is the loss of the vision of God. The Christian after death is no longer distracted by the pleasures of the world and his mind is no longer darkened by falsehood. He knows now that he can find full happiness only in the vision of God. Now he loves God more than ever before and yearns more intensely to see him. But he knows that his sinfulness makes this impossible. His yearning and his sorrow cause intense suffering which purges him of the dross of sin.

He has joy in his suffering because he knows it will soon end and he will see God face to face and be happy with him for ever. An old hymn says of Purgatory:

*"O place of happy pains,
and land of dear desires,
where love divine detains
glad souls among sweet fires."*

Prayers for the Dead

Those in Purgatory are not alone in their suffering. They are members of the Body of Christ and are assisted by all the other members. When one part of the human body is in pain or distress, all the other parts assist it. The same is true of the members of Christ's Body. The saints in Heaven assist those in Purgatory by their prayers. Those on earth assist them by their prayers and sufferings. The Church from earliest times has offered up the Mass for the repose of those in Purgatory and encouraged Catholics to pray and make sacrifices for them. Inscriptions on the graves of the early Christians, and the prayers of the Church in her liturgy, testify to the constant belief that the living can help the "faithful departed."

Hell

Those who die loving evil and hating the light of God banish themselves from his presence for ever. The state in which these live is called in English "Hell", a word which means a hole or pit. In the Creed as translated into English we say that Christ "descended into Hell." But this refers to the place of the dead where the just men who died before Christ were detained, awaiting their redemption through Christ's death and resurrection. We usually call this *Limbo*. Christ called it *Abraham's bosom* (Luke 16, 22) or *Paradise* (Luke 23, 43). We find reference to it also in Eph. 4, 9 and in 1. Pet. 3, 19. The Hell of the damned is a very different state.

God does not desire the unhappiness of anyone. He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2, 4). It is the sinner who shuts himself off from God. We have experience of men in this life who will suffer utter misery rather than admit themselves to be sinners and give up the hatred which burns in them. Those in Hell are fixed in stubborn hatred for ever.

The greatest pain of Hell is the pain of loss. The wicked know that they are made for God and yet they have shut themselves off from him and deprived themselves of the only true joy. They burn with remorse, cursing and hating themselves for their folly. Yet they continue to hate God and all that is good. Hatred and remorse gnaw eternally within them. Jesus used of the damned the vivid expression of the prophet Isaiah, “their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched” (Is. 66, 24; Mark 9, 48).

Hell-fire

Jesus frequently warned his hearers of the eternal punishment of the wicked, and used the word “fire” to describe it. The fifth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel quotes many of his beautiful and consoling words. Yet among them are several treats of eternal punishment for the wicked and one direct reference to “the hell of fire” (Matt. 5, 22).

Many of the parables he used to point his lessons contain warnings of eternal punishment by fire. The parable of the tares, or weeds, describes how a farmer separates weeds from the wheat and burns them. The lesson is, so shall God’s angels do to the wicked, “they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil-doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt. 13, 41-42).

In the parable of the selfish rich man, Dives, and the beggar, Lazarus, whom he refused to help, Dives from Hell cries to Abraham in Heaven: “I am in anguish in this flame” (Luke 16, 19-31). He asks that Lazarus be allowed to put a drop of water on his tongue. But Abraham tells him that there is a great gulf between them which cannot be bridged.

The New Testament in many other places makes it clear that there is eternal suffering for the damned, and Christ used the word “fire” to describe it. Since he had at his command the whole of human language, this is the best word to describe it. It cannot be the same as earthly fire. This destroys what it burns and affects the senses of the body. The sufferings of Hell are eternal and affect the spirit. The fire, then, remains a mystery, but we cannot dismiss it as merely a figure of speech.

The Fire of Love

This we can say, that God's love is a furnace of intense yet calm fire. Only those who have that fire within them can be at peace with him. Those in Purgatory burn with love. Painful because it is not intense enough for them to be at one with him, yet calm because they are full of hope.

Hatred also is a fire which gives fuel to its own flames. Those in Hell are on fire with hatred of God, of themselves and of all others. Love alone can quench this fire of hatred. Since the damned are fixed in their refusal to love, they burn with hatred for ever. "Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9, 48; Is. 66, 24).

The Final Coming of Christ

Christ will return in glory at the end of time. When he was tried before the Court of the High Priest, he was asked: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" He replied: "I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14, 61-62). He will return to the earth and show that he is the Lord of all Creation and has triumphed over evil once and for all. His description of this, under the image of a great judgment, is given in the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel:

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . .

"Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . .

'And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25, 31-46).

Heaven

Those who die loving God will live with him for ever in union with Jesus Christ. This state of happiness is called Heaven.

We do not know where Heaven is or what it is like, nor can we imagine it. Its chief joy will be to know God as he is. In the third chapter of his first letter, St. John says: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see

him as he is" (1 John 3, 2). In the seventeenth chapter of his Gospel he quotes these words of Jesus, "And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17, 3).

The Beatific Vision

Heaven, then, is to see and love God, who is all beauty and truth. This is called the Beatific Vision.

To know the truth and appreciate beauty are among the greatest of human joys. But in this life truth is learnt laboriously and is known only dimly. It is like looking into one of those mirrors of beaten metal used in the ancient world, which gave a dim and blurred reflection. St. Paul, in his famous hymn in praise of love, the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, says: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13, 12). In the brilliant vision of God the blessed see clearly all beauty and all truth.

But love is greater than knowledge. Love gives the greatest joy to the human heart. The full knowledge of God is a thrilling ecstasy of love. So brilliant is the vision of him enjoyed by those in Heaven, that they need to receive from God a special power, which enables them to see him and not be blinded by the sight.

This vision brings perfect joy. Jesus called Heaven "the joy of your master" (Matt. 25, 21-23). Unlike human joy, it will not be short-lived, but will last for ever. Jesus said: "No one will take your joy from you" (John 16, 22). It will be an ecstasy full of peace. On earth men experience joy in love, but there are always partings, sufferings and human failings to spoil it. In heaven nothing will spoil it. It is thus described in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation:

"Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21, 3-4).

The Glorious Company

Those in heaven enjoy the glorious company of Christ, his Mother, the angels and all the blessed. After the final resurrection of the dead, all in Heaven will have glorious bodies. As St. Paul says, in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, they will be human bodies, yet completely changed, as the seed planted in the ground is changed into the golden ear of wheat. So the risen bodies will be the same as the earthly, but with a new splendour. "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . . For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality" (1

Cor. 15, 51-53). The risen bodies will be free and swift as the air, like the body of Christ, which passed through the walls of the Upper Room and rose above the clouds on Ascension Day.

St. John, in his Revelation, suggests that the blessed shall join in some wonderful form of liturgy, in which they will rejoice together and give glory to God for ever.

"And from the throne came a voice crying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, 'Hallelujah ! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory'" (Rev. 19, 5-7).

"All things new"

At the final coming of Christ on the Last Day the dead shall rise and the blessed will have glorified bodies. The whole universe will be changed, cleansed and made splendid, to share in the glory of risen man as it shared in man's fall. As St. Paul says, in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans: "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8, 21). St. John in his revelation says: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev. 21, 1-5).

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Pope John XXIII was admired by men of all religions because of his simple goodness, cheerfulness and loving kindness. He had a way of stating great truths in the simple language learnt from the peasant farmers among whom he was reared. He died on Whit Monday, 3rd June, 1963. He knew long before his death that he was suffering from an incurable disease, but he carried on working till he could no longer stand.

When congratulated on his eighty-first birthday, he said: "Any day is a good day on which to be born, and any day is a good day on which to die. We are ready when God calls." About the same time he said: 'God did not make this beautiful world to be a cemetery."

Five day before his death, he said to those at his bedside. "Do not worry about me. My bags are packed and I am ready, in fact very ready, to leave." When they told him that he had only a few hours to

live, he said: "Well, this is not a time to cry. This is a moment of joy and glory."

This calm faith in eternal life, and this detachment from the things of the world, are marks of the holy Christian. This longing to go to God is the mark of a saint. The early Christians expressed in the liturgy their longing for the coming of Christ and the glory of Heaven with the cry, "Maran atha", which means, "Come quickly!" St. John ends his Revelation, the last book of the Bible, with this cry. It is fitting that the Bible should end on this joyful note.

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon! Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'" (Rev. 22, 20).

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what way do you see the resurrection of Christ as a pledge of a future life in heaven? What did Christ say about this when bringing Lazarus back to life?
2. The word Purgatory is not used in the Bible. What are the reasons for believing in such a state of purification after death?
3. "The custom of praying for the dead is one of the most consoling of all Christian traditions". Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree?
4. "If there is not hell, Christ is a liar". Do you agree with this? Give your reasons.
5. Why do we believe that Christ will come again at the end of the world?
6. Can you quote St. John's description of heaven. (Rev. 21, 3-4). It is worth learning by heart.