

Trinity V, 2018:

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15 & 2.23-24; 1 Cor. 15:12-26; Mark 5:21-end.

'The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor.15:26)

'God did not make death. He does not delight in the death of the living. He created all things that they might exist.'

'The last enemy to be destroyed is death.'

What a pair of statements. God did not make death. He wants things to *live*. Death is alien, unwelcome, a terrible invader of God's world. It is an enemy. And one day, it will be destroyed.

I wonder how you react to such statements?

One reaction is intellectual: isn't this quite silly? After all, isn't death simply a necessary part of life? If nothing ever died, how would anything else get started and grow? There's a circle of life, a cycle of life, and death is just part of that. To rage against it is not only futile, but a little immature.

Another reaction is emotional. You've watched loved ones suffer for years. You watched their minds disintegrate, or cancer eat their bodies; you've held them as they groan in pain, when there's only so much the drugs can do. Frankly, you have longed for them to die. They've longed to die. And when death finally came, it was not the enemy but blessed relief.

So on both counts, we might turn to today's Bible readings and say: 'it isn't really like that.'

But let's think a bit more about those reactions. Take the second one first. The moment of death only comes as a blessed relief because of what goes before it. Life has been so mauled and wrecked that we no longer want to live it, or our loved ones to live it. Everything that was good about it – its joy, its vibrancy, its beauty – has been ground down.

Now the Bible would say that that grinding down is itself the power of death. Death doesn't just come when we die, but long before. Wherever joy and vibrancy and beauty are eroded, there's death. It come long before the end, before even a medical diagnosis. It's at work in all of us, from the very beginning – partly as a physical thing, but even more as a spiritual reality. Just think: we were made for joy, vibrancy, beauty. 'God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity' as Solomon puts it. Well, everytime something diminishes our joy, our vibrancy, our beauty: that's the power of death. Every time we act out of mean-ness, every-time we give way to greed or hate or fear, every-time we're smaller than God made us ... that's the power of death at work in us.

Which is why, incidentally, St. Mark puts the story of the woman with unstoppable bleeding right in the middle of the story of Jairus' daughter, like the filling in a sandwich. The story of Jairus' daughter is about the actual, physical moment of death. The story of the bleeding woman is about sickness. It's about terrible social isolation – that woman would have deemed impure and cut out of society. It's about misogyny and poverty and desperation. And Mark's point in putting that story inside Jairus' daughter's story is to say: look, it's all the same thing. It's all *death*. Everything that crushes down our joy and vibrancy and beauty: it's all the one great enemy, it's all Death.

And that – the crushing of joy and vibrancy and beauty – God did not make that. Sure, maybe our bodily existence was always going to have come to an end. Maybe human beings were never designed to simply go on and on. To that extent, death is natural, and God made it. But death as we actually experience it now – death as the power which grinds us down, and wrecks everything about us, before dealing the final blow: God did not make this. God made things that they might live, in joy and vibrancy and beauty. The death that wrecks them, God did not make. This death is the Great Enemy. And as St. Paul tells us, it will be destroyed.

And that is because of Jesus.

We are not here because we think Jesus of Nazareth gave some excellent moral and spiritual teaching, although he did.

We are not here because we think he was a splendid example of how to live, though he is.

We are here – this Church is here – because of what He did on Good Friday and Easter morning.

What he did was to endure the very worst Death could throw at him. He died as a criminal. He died abandoned and rejected, treated as a piece of human rubbish. There was nothing joyful and vibrant and beautiful on Cavalry hill. In every sense, it was the end of Life.

And then, the Creed says, he descended into Hell. And this tests our imaginations, but what we're being asked to conceive of is blackest, coldest, deadliest, loneliest place of all. The place where there is only shame and guilt and pain, the place of eternal misery. Take the worst thing you have done, and let it fill your heart and mind till nothing else is left, till it would kill all the good in you, and you have some conception of what is meant by Hell. And into that place, that state, whatever it is, into it Jesus goes.

And into the darkness, He comes as a light. A glow, a blaze, a flame – joy, vibrancy and beauty beginning to beat again, stronger now, stronger than ever before, stronger than all the darkness. And that light, that fire, begins to swell and spread. It wraps itself around all those lost in the dark, it wraps itself around them and weaves itself into them. It begins to make them light too. It begins to build up what death had torn down. It gives everything its beauty, joy and vibrancy back. The fire begun in Jesus, the Jesus-fire, burns higher and higher. As the hymn puts it, He becomes the Death of Death, and Hell's Destruction. *As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.*

And to be a Christian – to be here – is to say: ‘I want to be touched by that fire.’ I want to know that that touch of joy, vibrancy, beauty. Like the woman in Mark’s Gospel: *if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well. If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.*

We don’t have his clothes, of course. But we do have what He comes in today, the things He promised to be in. We have the Bible. We have each other. We have the gift of prayer, and we have bread and wine. *We have bread and wine.* One of the great saints called the Eucharist ‘the medicine of immortality’. The medicine of immortality. Now that saint knew fine well that one day he would die, that one day this body would simply wear down and give way to a glorious new body, on the far-side of resurrection. Of course, one day we die. But for someone whom Jesus has touched, for someone in whom the Jesus-fire burns bright and strong, in whom joy and vibrancy and beauty has come again – well, for such a one, death holds no fear. It is no longer the enemy. It is the gate of glory.

To our Lord Jesus, who won such a great victory, be all praise and glory forever and ever.
Amen.