

Lent 5 – 9 March 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Today our readings force us to think about something we would much prefer not to, our mortality. Death tends not to be something we like to think about. In fact we do pretty much anything we can not to think about it. And with the rise of science, medicine has tended to treat death as an ultimate failure, something that will be eventually be treatable. But in fact a good death is part of a good life.

Previous generations were of course much more aware of death than we are. And on an individual level we are incredibly fortunate that death is not the voracious and early visitor that it once was. I for one rejoice that the biblical lifespan ideal of four score years and ten has become a reality for most here in the developed world. Similarly, no one can convince me that we in church should return to a time when the ubiquitous reality of death was used as the ultimate incentive to following Christ. Fear of mortality as a method for spreading the gospel has a long and awful history, one that still finds its adherents.

But of course death was more than just a recruiting device for the medieval church: death was also a wonderful marketing opportunity. You could buy indulgences, essentially a kind of ecclesiastical life insurance policy that would to buy time off from purgatory. While such an approach might be tempting to 21st century churches wanting to be solvent, rapaciously capitalizing on death hardly served the medieval church well. Arguably that practice was one of the lowest points in the history of the church abusing its power and status in society, and no sane church would return to it.

That all said, there has to be a middle way between the medieval abuse of death as a means of making money or recruiting, and modern attempts to pretend that death will simply disappear if we don't think about it.

Between those two poles, a lot more needs to be said about death from a Christian perspective. And as our readings this morning foreground, the

scriptures are a lot more forthright and a lot more honest about death than we might imagine. Death is not something consigned to the margins. Nor is death manipulated for devious ends of the writers. Instead, the reality of death is held out to us as another place where God is able to bring life and love.

A few years ago I went to what for me is one of the most quintessentially American experiences, the drive in movie. Set in the middle of absolutely nowhere, on the New York – Vermont border, I was able to worship the giant silver screen for two showings. It must have been almost midnight when the second movie started, and it was one of the most terrifying things I have ever seen. It was all about Egyptian mummies coming back to life and ravaging the world. In the movie, we saw the most amazing rendition of a scene straight out of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, with a skeleton suddenly re-growing living tissue, sinew and flesh. I know that if I had seen this on a small screen at home I would probably have found the whole thing ridiculously comical. But when the screen is larger than a house, something about those reanimating mummies was awesomely terrifying. So much so, that I think I irrationally checked the rear view mirror for wandering mummies when we rode home that night.

While I don't think that Ezekiel or the Gospel are in exactly the same genre as a horror movie, I do think that we have by and large forgotten how the imaginative world of the scriptures was also meant to be awe inspiring. But instead of allowing scripture as awe-inspiring, we have grown accustomed to treating the scriptures, rather than the movies, as stories frankly unworthy of our time and attention.

And yet the point of the scriptures is to remind us of something incredibly important to the religious imagination. Through the raising of Lazarus and the reanimation of bones in Ezekiel we are shown that God is able to transcend the limits of life and death. And while I would be one of the first to recognize that this does not appear to accord with what contemporary science believes about cause and effect, it would be churlish to impose a foreign scientific methodology on these stories.

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If we are able to suspend our disbelief when we view the nonsense that is a mummy coming to life in an Egyptian pyramid it seems strange that we cannot do something similar when confronted with these amazing stories in the scriptures. For in every case, the point is not whether the story actually happened. What is important is the meaning the story is seeking to tell.

In the case of the scriptures, the meaning is pretty clear. Death is not to be feared. Not necessarily to be sought after either. But definitely not to be feared. And unlike what the medieval church taught, Jesus taught that even in death God retains the power to reach out to a human being and restore them to life. Without the story of Lazarus it is arguable whether Christians could believe in the resurrection. We might believe in ‘a’ resurrection, the one resurrection of one particular person who was completely God. But without Lazarus it would have been hard for the church to universalize belief in a general sense of resurrection.

Lazarus, like Ezekiel’s prophecy, reminds us that the story of Christianity is not just a story about one person. Rather it is a story about each and every one of us. And as we prepare to enter Holy Week next week, Lazarus alerts us up to the possibility that the meaning of life is not circumscribed in death. Death is important to be sure. But death does not define us.

It may well be that the Christian vision of facing death squarely is the only sure way of denying death the power to dominate our lives. Until we acknowledge our mortality we can never be able to see ourselves as truly human. This may be why one philosopher has referred to “The Gift of Death”. Like life, death is not something we can control, rather it is gifted to us. And while we may not like it, it is the horizon upon which all else makes sense.

Next week we will be in Holy Week, with the triumphant entry by Jesus into Jerusalem. We will become witnesses to a rollercoaster of emotions, from jubilation to desolation and death and back to joy and life again. As we ready ourselves for that journey into the heart of our faith, it is good to know that death is a fulcrum of our faith. Without it nothing

makes sense. Without mortality, no creation or incarnation. And without death, no resurrection.

And if death can play such a transitional and positive role in the story of our faith, maybe God wants us to know that death is not the end of our stories either. So be not afraid. And allow yourself to walk alongside Jesus in the way of the cross this Holy Week. For only by encountering the worst do we find the best. And if in Holy Week we allow Jesus to touch us, as he touched Lazarus, we too can experience the new life that comes from God. Amen.