

Homily for Easter 4B, April 21, 2024

Part of a series on "O Death, where is thy sting?"

St James Cathedral, Toronto by Archbishop Colin R. Johnson

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we welcome (at 11) the St. George's Society of Toronto. "Inspired by the bravery and generosity of England's patron saint, [the Society was founded in Toronto to be] agents of change within the city. ...Originally founded to assist immigrants [by providing] food, medical services, and financial support to individuals in need, regardless of their national origins. Today, the members of the St. George's Society Toronto are impassioned patrons of culture, education, health care, and charitable institutions across the city." [<https://www.stgeorgesto.org/about>]

This Tuesday is the feast day of St. George.

St. George was martyred in the Diocletian persecutions around AD 303 - a Christian Roman soldier who would not give up his faith even in the face of death.

Iconography of St. George often depicts the warrior saint slaying a dragon - part of his legend from at least the 11th C., which combined his bravery in facing a seemingly all-powerful and insatiable foe, with his generosity to the poor and vulnerable. He became one of the most widely venerated saints of the church, east and west, and even among Muslims. As you know, we have a chapel in this Cathedral dedicated to St. George.

To me, the St. George icons often look a lot like those of St. Michael the Archangel. Revelation 12, recounts a war in heaven. Michael fights the dragon and his minions who are intent on destroying a fleeing woman. Michael and his legions battle to protect her and her child - symbolically Mary and the Christ Child or the nascent Church - from being swallowed up by the ravenous dragon. And, like the later story of St. George, the dragon is defeated forever.

So, here we are in the 21C talking about dragons! And yet, everyone here knows what I mean when I say "dragon". A mythical beast with the power to destroy us. Dragons embody our fears and nightmares - the dangers lying in wait in the darkness, the terror lurking on the edges and unknown depths, set to snatch us away and swallow us up. Medieval maps often marked the boundaries of the known world with the words "Here be dragons."¹

¹ Ideas from sermon preached by Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE, October 31, 2006, St. Alban's, Washington, DC

We may be 21st C people but we all know dragons. Real dragons - not mythical ones - that stalk our days. A debilitating illness, a desperate hardship, a fraught relationship, a gnawing dread. "The germs, the virus, the cancer or whatever it is that seeks to destroy the body." Or psychologically, "all the negative attitudes and feelings that suck away vitality from within: resentment, bitterness, remorse, regrets, lack of peace." [Bloom²]

The most fearsome weapon of the dragon is death itself.

Dragons have incredible power to hold us enthralled. Our lives can be so captive to these dragons that we can be enervated by our dread, hunkering down behind our protective fortifications, half-dead long before we actually die.

Or ...

we can courageously ride out and confront these dragons and learn to live.

Take heart! The gift and the challenge of the gospel is that you do not have to fear the dragons.

All they can do is kill you, and you are going to die anyways!

Oscar Wilde said, "The statistics on death are really impressive; one out of one people dies."

That's the good news?!!

No, death is inevitable; the good news is, "Death is not the last word."

Not for God, not for the world, not for the church, not for you.

How does this fit with today's proclamation of the gospel that we just heard?

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. It's a favourite image of Jesus (and a favourite image of King David before him - the shepherd king of Israel).

I've already talked about iconography, and if you look at stained glass windows of the Good Shepherd you see beautiful pastoral scenes, warm sunshine, beaming down on a gentle, smiling man, often carrying a miraculously clean and docile lamb, with fluffy sheep munching fields of wildflowers by a trickling stream.

This has absolutely no resemblance to biblical shepherds! The shepherd is a fierce, hardened, scarred protector, ever vigilant to defend, resourceful in finding

² Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, "On Death"

sustenance for his herd, courageous in facing deadly foes. Why does he do this? He takes responsibility for his flock. He knows and loves them, and he is prepared to lay down life for his sheep. He is not afraid of death. He knows death is not the worst thing, nor it is the last thing.

The key to this is the relationship between shepherd and sheep, the creator and the created - a relationship of love. Fierce love. Faithful love. Love that abides. Love that transfigures. Not fear - fear of failure, fear of pain, fear of inadequacy, fear of loss, fear of defeat, fear of death.

Not fear, but love. Love **for** the Father, and the reciprocated love **of** the Father. And if one is rooted in that love where we are fully known, the love is never self-absorbed and possessive but overflows in bold, confident, life giving and life transforming love for the other.

A love that is generous and gracious.

A love that conquers fear.

A love that transcends death.

In the 23rd Psalm, after all that charming stuff about the shepherd, green pastures and still waters in the first half, the poet confronts the darker issues:

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Why? Because you, O God, are with me - your presence comforts and relieves me, sustains me and brings me home to goodness and mercy. You give me abundance of life. It is in the very midst of death that we discover that we are in the real presence of life.

My daughter, Rachel, a Nurse Practitioner, spent some of her early career in an AIDS' orphanage in South Africa. After several weeks where she spent long hours caring for children who one after another died in her arms, she began to question her role. She said she felt like an angel of death. But then she looked around her and saw the children in the home engaged in the ordinary things around them - school, homework, soccer, and friendships, and she realised that they were all busy living not busy dying. She understood that she was being called to assist them in living, to be not an angel of death but an angel of life.

In one of our eucharistic prayers, we pray, "Gracious God, [Jesus'] perfect sacrifice destroys the power of sin and death; by raising him to life you give us life for evermore. Therefore we proclaim our hope. Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." [Eucharistic prayer 1, BAS]

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who willingly faces death and sacrifices himself on the Cross for the world he so loves, will not be bound by death. On the third day God raised him from the dead.

"What then are we to say about these things?" asks St. Paul. "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." [Romans 8]

Then as we pray in eucharistic prayer 6 "And that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us, he sent the Holy Spirit, his own first gift for those who believe, to complete his work in the world, and to bring to fulfilment the sanctification of all."

A great 20th C Russian Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of England, wrote that our attitude to "death is the touchstone of our attitude to life. People who are afraid of death are afraid of life. It is impossible not to be afraid of life with all its complexity and dangers if one is afraid of death. This means that to solve the problem of death is not a luxury. If we are afraid of death we will never be prepared to take ultimate risks; we will spend our life in a cowardly, careful and timid manner. It is only if we can face death, make sense of it, determine its place and our place in regard to it that we will be able to live in a fearless way and to the fulness of our ability. Too often we wait until the end of our life to face death, whereas we would have lived quite differently if only we had faced death at the outset."³

So how should we live?

³ Bloom, "On Death"

With a sense of the importance of this present moment. Look around and see how you can make a difference. You cannot do everything; but you cannot do nothing. St. John writes, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

Clarify the values you hold dear and check how they align with the Christian values you profess. Live courageously and live hope filled. Embrace an element of principled risk taking. Cultivate a life of generosity and curiosity. Consider your legacy to the world, your community, your family. Write a will. Live sacrificially for others, knowing that in so doing you are following our Lord. Know that no matter what, you are deeply loved as a child of God and that you will never be separated from that all-embracing love.

And finally, remember you live in a community of faith. You are not perfect, and you are not self-sufficient. You are not meant to be. You will not always be fearless; you may not always feel full of hope; you may be overwhelmed at times with the world's sorrows or your own. But you are not alone. You are part of the Church of the living God. Others can pray for you when you cannot. Others can hold your faith for you while you are assailed by doubt. Others can grieve with you and embrace you with compassion until you are able to breathe again.

And then you can do all that for a sister or brother in their need. We need each other.

A final word from Metropolitan Anthony:

"The [ancient] injunction 'be mindful of death' is not a call to live with a sense of terror in the constant awareness that death is to overtake us and that we are to perish utterly with all that we have stood for. It means rather: 'be aware of the fact that what you are saying now, doing now, hearing, enduring or receiving now may be the *last* event or experience of your present life'. In which case it must be a crowning, not a defeat; a summit, not a trough."⁴

So, go out and slay some dragons!

⁴ Bloom, "On Death"