

SERMON 844

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 6, 2014

940th Week as Priest

766th Week at St Dunstan's

31st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The readings from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones and the raising of Lazarus make it impossible for us to avoid completely the reality of death as a part of this life. This past week included the Feast Day of John Donne, an English poet and priest, the dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London during the great age of the King James Bible, and the author of the Holy Sonnets.

Death, be not proud, (wrote Donne)
though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so ...

In a true sense, human beings are forever locked in a struggle of life and death. Our health care system, the best in the history of the world, exists to cure illness, utilize state-of-the-art surgery, and stave off the ravages of disease and death. Our diet, exercise program, and lifestyle serve to make us our healthiest selves and to prolong our

lives. The average life expectancy in America today is 80 years of age, and a recent *National Geographic* magazine reported that today's children will probably live to the age of 120. This is close to miraculous, considering the fact that a citizen of the new United States in 1776 could expect to live only 35 years, and a century ago, the life expectancy of the average American was just over 50.

We could say that we are blessed—with long life, with health and nutritious food, with clean air and water, with abundant natural resources, with more leisure and more free time than any other human beings in the history of the world. But we know that we take much of this for granted, and we simply assume that we deserve, and will always have, all that we presently enjoy. And some significant portion of humankind, an ever-increasing segment of humanity, has come to believe that we are the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own destiny, the gods of our own creation, and we no longer have need of religion—of faith, obedience, confession, worship—or any other spiritual discipline.

But we Christians know that this is not so. At some point—whether we are 35, 50, 80, or 120—we will look death in the face, and we will be held accountable for the lives we have led and the beliefs we have held. And how we have lived, and how we have died, will count for something. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas raged against the death of his father in a famous poem that begins

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

But we Christians should know that the strife is o'er, the battle is already won. Death has no victory over us. John Donne called down proud Death from its mighty and dreadful promontory.

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

Our God has the ultimate power and the best intention for us to defy and overthrow poor Death. In the words of the prophet Ezekiel, we are more than dry bones, for he has breathed his breath into us, and in him we live and move and have our being. We know that he is the Lord. He has put his Spirit within us, and we live with him, and through him, and in him.

Poor Death has no last say, because ultimately the one who raised Lazarus from death has shown us that he himself was raised from death, and with him we will also be raised to new life. Saint Paul told us this very thing:

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 also
through his Spirit which dwells in you.

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill and dying, he determined to go to Bethany. However, he did not go right away. He waited until he knew that his friend had died. Not because he didn't care or he didn't love them. His purpose was something greater this time than healing the sick: it was *raising the dead* that he wished to show—not only to his friends and to the learned teachers of his day—but also to us, to all of us—that we might believe that death is not the end of life, that death is our entrance to eternal life in him, in Christ.

The Prayer Book reminds us that grief is not unchristian. We mourn those who have died because we love them and they are no longer with us. We remember that even Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. The death of Father Buddy was a hard blow to many of you, and so have been the deaths of parents, children, friends, and neighbors. The recent death of Dot Harris was felt by all of us as a loss and a grief. Precious in his sight is the death of our Lord's servants. But death is not the end of the story for us. We are a people of hope. We are a people of resurrection. John Donne's last words of his Holy Sonnet are

One short sleep past, [and we will] wake eternally
And death shall be no more;
Death, thou shalt die. **AMEN.**

960 words