

19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Luke 12:35-40

In our society we live with deadlines; deadlines for our income tax assessment to be lodged, deadlines for our credit card payments to be paid, deadlines for our work to be submitted. Our entire day, seemingly our entire life, is scheduled. I know what time I must leave for work, I know what time I must catch the train, I know what time a television programme begins. This, in spite of the pressure that I might feel in regard to deadlines, still gives me a sense of security because I know how long that I have. If anything takes me by surprise then it is my own fault because I was not paying attention. But even when that happens I can still try to blame someone or something else and try to wriggle my way out. There is, however, one thing at least of which I cannot be certain, and that is the time of my death. But here I speak not so much in terms of leaving this life but of the next life. For at my death I shall be brought before the judgement seat of God and there my whole life will be laid bare—all that is good and all that is bad.

Our culture does a great deal to ignore death, to sanitise death, to cover it up and to make it pretty. Funerals are no longer about engaging with the mystery of death and praying for the forgiveness of sins. Even in death some people insist on looking backwards to the life lived rather than to the present and the reality of death. It is why the sacrifice of Christ seems so underwhelming. To understand that the sacrifice of Christ put an end to death and gained for us everlasting life it is necessary to appreciate what it means to be dead. Otherwise, the whole passion and death and resurrection of Christ becomes a platitude, a soothing phrase that really means nothing in itself but which is used because it was what is said at moments of death.

The fact is that without Christ there is death. And that means there is no heaven but instead everlasting isolation. The fact is, that this is still a possibility for each and everyone of us. Not one of us can be certain of reaching Heaven. The fact is that there is such a place as Hell, that there is such a person as Satan. The fact is that there is such a place as Purgatory, and that we are accountable for our lives.

Many times people say that if God is love then why would he let anyone go to Hell, so of course everyone goes to Heaven. Well, God is love. We know that from the life of Christ, we know that from the letters of St. John. But it isn't simply about whether God loves me, it is about whether I love God. To be in Heaven means to live with God for all eternity. And If I don't want to live with God in this life then why would I want to live with God for all eternity? If I choose to live without God in this life then I choose to live without God in the next life, and that is Hell. It is not God that determines our final destination. We determine our final destination by the choices we make in this life.

If I live my life with some sense of faith and I do what I can to lead a good life, then to some small extent I have chosen Heaven. But the reality is that I have not lived my life fully in Christ and so I am still marked by sin and injustice and that must be removed before I can enter paradise. And the place of that purification is called Purgatory. We must never assume Heaven for ourselves or for anyone else, in particular for those that we love. There is nothing more uncaring than to never pray for those who have died, even if we believe they are in Heaven. We must pray for them, we must seek indulgences for them, we must offer them our good works and our sufferings. The fact is that in Purgatory the soul is no longer capable of doing anything to make up for its sins. The soul in Purgatory is reliant wholly on the grace of God and the prayers of those of us who remain in this life. If I truly love someone that has died then I will not presume that they are in Heaven, however much I hope that they are.

Because if I would not leave someone I loved lacking what I could give them in this life then why would I leave them lacking what is needed in the next life. And even, please God, those that we love have been borne to Heaven and are alive with God and all the angels and are themselves counted amongst the saints, then it is not as though our prayers are in vain for we believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother, gathers those prayers in her arms and shares them with those of her children who are still most in need.