

Unless a Grain of Wheat Dies...
November 8, 2015 | Alan Reese

Good morning. I am blessed with this opportunity to reflect on the meaning of death and dying in light of the death and dying of Jesus the Christ. In reflecting on Christ, I am inspired by the poet Lewis Thompson who had this to say about our Lord:

Christ, Supreme Poet, lived Truth
So passionately that every
Gesture of his, at once
Pure act and perfect Symbol
Embodies the Transcendent.

In this light let us consider look to some scriptures related to Christ's own teaching on death and dying both in relation to his own death and to our own.

[John 12: 24-25 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

[John 15:1] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.... [John 14:4] Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. [John 15:5] I am the Vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in Me, and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

[John 16:7] "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you ...[John 16:12] I have yet many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. [John 13:13] When the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all the truth...."

[1 Cor 15:35b] "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. [1 Cor 15:49] Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. [1 Cor 15:50] I tell you this brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."

My own Christian faith, not rooted in any particular community, finds expression among a few mystical Catholics and, let me say, among some of the most generous and gentle of the Mennonites. It has been both challenged and enlivened by an intensified experience of death over the last several years: the loss of my spiritual mentor the Benedictine monk Father James Gray of St Peter's Abbey, Muenster, SK, the death of my Mother-in-Law, my own Father, our 23 year old niece who died from cancer just six months after her wedding, as well as the deaths of so many family friends and acquaintances.

Of late I have been meditating on the Death of Jesus with even more attention. No longer with academic interest but with a new urgency since my diagnosis in May. I now find myself in a situation that has no resolution, no cure, perhaps palliation. My best case scenario would be my 1/100,000 chance of a complete remission from Stage IV colon cancer. The worst case scenario will reveal an especially aggressive cancer that will continue its progress from the colon and the

lungs to ever more vital organs. Opportunities for denial are limited, and my death, certain as that of any mortal, is now not only certain but relatively imminent. So my meditation this morning begins with a simple question: "What does my faith have to do with my terminal situation?"

As mentioned I seemed to have more than a fair share of significant deaths in my life and not so long ago realized that I too will have a funeral. I find myself looking about sometimes while I sit at church at NPMC and start to think about what hymns might be appropriate and how there will be a little brass plaque with my name and dates on it on the church wall. Hmm where might my ashes be set and will there need to be a picture of me? Blessedly a rather large cross on the sanctuary wall helps me to remember larger, deeper things, context of my death. Jesus, our Teacher, has walked this cross road before me to his own death. As I meditate on the Scriptures it becomes clear, in ways that I seemed not to have grasped before, that Christianity has as its central symbol and deepest mystery the cross— that death is not only the natural end of all that lives but lies at the very heart of the religion that I have called my own since I was 16. I still vividly recall the ice-cold water into which I was fully immersed at my baptism. I had been told that I was being baptized into the death of Jesus into a new way of life in lived in Him. I was cold, dripping wet, and joyously ecstatic. But I really didn't have a clue about this talk of dying and rising beyond the hope of heaven comfortably certain and well down the road. Many years have passed. Now I have yet another baptism that awaits me. How do I walk this way of the cross common to all yet uniquely my own? I remember Jesus, I read and reread the Gospel accounts, I call them to mind, they call me to prayer, I remember Jesus. I recall that He struggled in the Garden asking God to remove the cup of his sufferings but came to affirm God's will rather than his own. I recall that he proceeded to walk the way of the cross to the hill of the skull. He was crucified, died, and was buried. In all this I bring to mind, again and again; that nothing I fear of the coming sufferings and pains of my disease is alien or unknown to Jesus. I recall my earlier experiences from my heart disease and open-heart surgery and recall past graces experienced in adversity. So I hope to unite myself to Jesus in the challenges to come and find a meaning in this process that involves the death of "me." I too am grain of wheat, I too am seed, I too must die. But Jesus has died and Jesus is my Teacher. In reflecting on the death of Jesus, St Paul prayed that his own sufferings might join with Christ's in the work of redemption. Perhaps there is a way to make our sufferings meaningful by uniting them with those of Christ whose Body is said to be the Church- we are limbs of that Body. Once again I am drawn back to the mystery of baptism and ways in which we may actually participate in Christ. Each day, living "in the Valley of the Shadow" becomes increasingly meaningful. I look at others very differently. Each of us will grow older, get sick, and someday die. We are part of cycles of Nature where the death of beings nourishes the living, who in their turn return to the dust and to the soil. Our own dying also involves the mystery of the grain of wheat that dies, of the seed that is sown. It was necessary for Jesus as he lived among us a human among humans in time and space, to die and it is just as necessary that I go too. Yes I fear the discomforts, humiliations, and pains to come (I made the classic rookie mistake of searching on line to find out what's it like to die from colon cancer, way to scare yourself silly, Alan ☺) but I do not walk this journey without a Teacher.[I can go away from the internet and back to the Gospels, I am not going on this journey without A Teacher] Somehow I participate in the necessary suffering of his Body. In this the best practice is to let go; [old saying to let go and let God – a good one to chew on, the practice is to let go] to recall that all that I possess, enjoy, and cherish in this life, my very self – me!" -is going to die with me and it's okay. May I be able to say with Him "it is finished" and commend myself to the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." Yes death, but a death from periphery to center, from the outside world that we live in, to the deepest inside of everything! Remember that seed, that grain of wheat?

Well I wouldn't be giving a sermon if I didn't reference a medieval mystical writer. Meister Eckhart in the 14th century once told his congregation of religious women:

The seed of God is in us.
Given an intelligent and hardworking farmer
It will thrive and grow up into God, whose seed it is;
And accordingly its fruits will be God-nature.
Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees,
And God seeds into God.

Of course, no one really knows how they will die and in the meantime I have to deal with a medical establishment that, while well-meaning, seems to assume that the terminal patient will yet wish to fight the cancer with every bit of chemo and radiation and surgery that can be provided so to grasp at life. I feel an echo in this attitude of the poet Dylan Thomas' rather disturbing cry to his dying father: "Rage, Rage, against the dying of the light." Grasp life, don't go, fight! But our life is a gift, if life is good can we not trust that death rounding our life is not somehow also gift? Seeds are wonderful but they turn into something different. It's okay to fall to the earth and die. Surely faith involves our response to the deepest realities of life including our dying? So I will remember Jesus, his life and his cross, Christ "Pure Act and Perfect Symbol." Let me conclude with yet another poem, I will read "The Avowal" by poet Denise Levertov:

"The Avowal"
As swimmers dare
To lie face to the sky
And water bears them
As hawks rest upon air
And air sustains them,
So would I learn to attain
Free fall, and float
Into Creator Spirit's deep embrace.

Amen [Revised November, 2015]

READINGS TO ACCOMPANY THE SERMON ON NOVEMBER 8 at NPMC

Poems and Meditations

Christ, Supreme Poet, lived Truth
So passionately that every
Gesture of his, at once
Pure act and perfect Symbol
Embodies the Transcendent.
:Lewis Thompson (1909-1949)

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Free fall, and float
Into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace.

:Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

Scripture Readings

[Psalm 126: 4]

Restore our fortunes O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb!

5. May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

6. Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

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