

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

“[O Lord,] I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

There’s always something sobering about the Gospel reading today. Often when we hear of death, it is mentioned and then moved on in conversation of something more uplifting and pleasant. The sobering thing, however, is the vivid image before us today that forces us to face the fact that death isn’t the end. There is, indeed, more than just dying from this world and that’s the end of it. And as Christians we know this, and we confess this but we don’t always think or live in with this reality that there are two different outcomes after death as Jesus shows us. Today, then, you are called to hear your Lord speak and to live with this in mind; Jesus is teaching you how to die.

Listen again to what Jesus is teaching you. “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.”

It’s a cliché but no less true, “death is the great equalizer.” When someone dies it doesn’t matter one iota who he is, how much money he has, or even how old or young he may be. Death is, as the Prophet Isaiah writes, “the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.” Death is here in the reading from Luke’s Gospel and it’s very vivid. The physical nature of things jumps out when we hear the state of Lazarus in this life and then the state of the rich man in hell.

The hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” which is sung on Good Friday and has a part in St. Matthew’s Passion by Bach, has as one of its stanzas, “Be Thou my consolation, my shield, when I must die; remind me of thy passion when my last hour draws nigh. Mine eyes shall then behold thee, upon thy cross shall dwell, my heart by faith enfold thee. Who dieth thus dies well.” Dying well is dying in the Christian faith; it’s dying in God’s grace in Christ. The Christian death is the death that looks to the Lord and his death and sees death conquered and defeated by the one who emptied himself bearing the sin of the world and the shame of the cross. This is “dying well” and is the art of dying as was a popular topic in the Middle Ages especially during times when the Plague was running rampant, there were even two books published titled, *Ars Moriendi* or “The Art of Dying.”

But you see, here in this reading, Jesus admonishes you that not all death is dying well as the rich man shows. The rich man went through life not preparing for death. He loved but did not have a godly love which was born out of faith. Sure, he loved things, but these were all vanity. He had a good life in terms of the things of this world now he wants even the smallest drop of water to touch his parched tongue, quite the contrast from feasting sumptuously every day. But the thing is, this shouldn’t surprise him that he’s in this state. The rich man called Abraham “father,” which can tell us that he was someone who had heard God’s word. The Jews, who called Abraham their “father” had the oracles of God, God’s word entrusted to them. The rich man had everything in this life but the most important thing he did have, he paid no attention to or at least didn’t pay much to was God’s word. He had Moses and the Prophets, but he didn’t listen.

Now that reality sits in, and he’s sees how his whole life on earth was really a life of poverty, he still thinks with an unrepentant heart. He still wants to call the shots to Abraham like some rich man demanding a slave bring more meat at his daily feast. “And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send

him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'

He wants his brothers to be spared of this same fate, yet Abraham answers his cry. "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'" Abraham tells the rich man what he, Abraham knew during his earthly life, he had God's word. He knows a thing or two about this Moses and the Prophets even though they came years and years after him. Abraham, in the Old Testament reading, had something counted to him through God's word. Abraham had faith in the promises of God. "And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

Abraham had God's word and he believed it. His faith which trusted in God through his word was counted to him as righteousness. His treasure was the righteousness of faith. He was humble in that he looked outside of himself trusting in what God promised him. His life was lived in preparation for death knowing the Lord would fulfill his promises. Even when Abraham was about to kill his own son, Isaac, Abraham was trusting in the Lord who is able to raise the dead as the Epistle of Hebrews tells us in the New Testament. Abraham had Moses and the Prophets, and they were his rich feast upon which he feasted sumptuously. The rich man, however, had God's word and he rejected it and now his brothers are tempting the same end. Lazarus, was called by name by God and though he lacked things in a world sense, having God's word he had everything, he had eternal life. Lazarus lived by faith. His life was a life of hope in the glory to come

For you, dear Christians hearing this word of God spoken to you today there is a warning from God. First Jesus is showing you your own mortality. The wages of sin is death; and you are sinner. Jesus is preparing you for death. Jesus is warning you what happens when you do not listen to what he teaches you in the word he has given to you. A life lived in this world which does not eyes toward death and the grave is a life that is really a living death already. Right after the Gospel reading from John 3 last week Jesus says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." This is where the words of Abraham, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." sobering and a call to repentance. If you won't listen to God's word, then you are lost and not even someone rising from the dead will convince you of the things of God. You have everything you need in the Scriptures.

The temptation is real, though, to listen to other things or simply not listen to God's word and get caught up in the here and now. It's easy to put out of sight the thought that hell is real with real torment and real people go there. That lifestyle of the rich man shows us what was his attitude toward his possessions. He wasn't condemned simply because he was rich, but his riches were his God. This is seen in how he treated Lazarus who was at his gate. The rich man had plenty and Lazarus was in need. Rather than using his possessions in service to his neighbor, he rejoiced and reveled in what he had. The Epistle reading explains this well when God said through the pen of St. John, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Look hard at your life and examine it closely. Ask yourself this question, "is there anything in my life that I am loving in a way like the rich man? Go through the Ten Commandments and compare your life to them. Am I living a life that knows I am heading toward death, or I am just living my life my own way, on my own terms. Or to put it in the statement of Abraham, "I have God's word, am I listening to it or finding every excuse to not hear it, put it on the back burner, or not conform my life to it?"

It's always a telling thing and marker of this when you stop and start thinking about this and what God says to you. When your honest with yourself and you realize what it is you are treasuring in this life and what you are putting all

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your time and effort or even what you are fearing into you see that you need to repent. If you can look at your past week or month and count on one hand the number of times you actually sat down and read the Scriptures but can't even count the number of hours you have devoted to things like sporting events, television shows, or even your work when it has come to define your life then you are in danger of being like the rich man. So too when you have God's word and yet you want to be arrogant and stubborn enough to remain in sin or think you know better than God and what he teaches you then you also need to repent. You have Moses and the Prophets, listen to them. Look at what you love as well and see where you have failed to love your neighbor. What too has formed your hope and how you view each day heading toward the grave. Repent.

Dying well is dying in Christ. It's realizing that death is only because of the fall into sin and there is a right and godly fear you have in relation to it. But here's the thing about death and how you see who you are as a Christian, you have victory over death. The comfort of Christ today is found in the Lord who was crucified for you and is indeed risen from the dead and does, in fact, preach to you. As you are going through this dying world and see your own mortality Jesus fixes your eyes on life. This very morning the Lord is in your midst, and he is here with a word to say to you. He says, "I forgive you. I have taken your sin upon my shoulders. I have been and am faithful. See me upon the cross, see my hands, feet, and side and see that by my stripes you are healed. I have washed you clean in Holy Baptism, I have taken your filthy rags and replaced them with a righteous robe. I bring you into my kingdom and I feed you at the banquet where I give you my own body and blood and you have forgiveness, life, and salvation and look forward to the day where you will be with me at the feast that has no end." This is what Jesus says to you today, listen to him.

Fixing your eyes on Christ you have a new life and a life that lives knowing and living with a gaze toward the horizon where you see your grave to be sure, but it stands open and empty as the Lord stands over it and having lifted you out of your grave. Your life is lived preparing for death, but you face it with the promise of the resurrection from the dead. You go through this life seeing the things of this world as temporal and you are stewards of the possessions you have. When your neighbor is in need, when he has been placed at your gate, you help him as you can, and you point him to the same hope you have in Christ. And as you think about death your life is lived in view of your Lord's death and resurrection. You know that even as you suffer for the sake of Christ your glory is to come. The day of your vindication will come when you will be exalted, and your hope has not been in vain and even as you will not be put to shame trusting in Christ. You cling to the promises that because he lives so shall you and just as he is risen from the dead you too shall rise from your graves and live with him and his saints in the new creation he will create. Whenever that day may come, or if the Lord returns first, you die well a Christian death which is a death that has life.

Dear Christians be encouraged today and see the wonderful hope you have in Christ who was crucified for you and has atoned for your sin, conquered death, and gives you his righteousness. J.S. Bach ended another one of his great works, "St. John's Passion" with a proclamation that sums up well what you look see in Christ and what this means for you. After hearing the whole Passion account from John's Gospel and ending with Jesus being laid into the tomb the choir sings, "Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine" (Rest well, you holy remains). Then the great work of Bach ends with these words which preach to you exactly what it means for you as you go through this veil of tears toward your eternal glory. This is your prayer as you prepare for death and as you have the confidence to die as a Christian, "Lord, let at last Thine angels come, To Abram's bosom bear me home, That I may die unfearing; And in its narrow chamber keep My body safe in peaceful sleep Until Thy reappearing. And then from death awaken me, That these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy glorious face, My Savior and my fount of grace. Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend, And I will praise Thee without end."

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