

Death, a Lenten Mirror

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In Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul reveals a hard lesson. He failed to attract people to Jesus when he kept silent about Christ crucified. He tried to lead with wisdom and wonders. But people might find these elsewhere. When he changed his starting point, the Lord's suffering and death gained Paul a hearing and attracted adherents. Holy Week focuses on only a few days of Jesus' life, and yet the Passion and Resurrection take up about a third of Gospel pages.

Let's remember this as we enter Holy Week. And go a step further. Contemplating our own suffering and death makes Christ more real and relevant to us. Let me skip many steps in my argument, and suggest that we fail in our presentation of the Good News when we gloss over mortality. If we leave out the Catholic Catechism's treatment of "the last things" (numbers 1020 through 1060), the presentation of the faith loses integrity and reason for being.

Considering our own death provides a mirror that tells us what we look like, what we value, where we are blessed, and where we miss the mark. Composed hundreds of years before Christ, Psalm 90 meditates on this important theme, including a petition to God at verse 12: "Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart."

I think that a strong current in our culture puts off important decisions because we act as if people are immortal. I mean that we avoid decisions by leaving them to the next election cycle or the next generation by "kicking the can down the road." Our society operates as if it is acceptable to let whole lifetimes pass without reaching out to correct needs in health care, education, public safety and opportunities to "naturalize" into citizenship.

"The measure that you measure with will be measured back to you," says Matthew 7:2. When we do not feel the vulnerability brought by life's short duration, we only deepen the vulnerability and suffering of others. If I am unable to look squarely at my temporariness "above the grass," I become immune to considering urgency among people who are walled off from the good things I might open to them.

There is that expression about our earthly wealth: "You can't take it with you." This may not be true in every sense. When we don't work for the common good, and an equitable sharing of life's benefits and burdens, then we can take with us opportunities for improved health care, education, public safety and paths to citizenship. Lent, and the wisdom of knowing the shortness of life, can help us leave behind things that really matter when we no longer can use them.

To put it bluntly, it will go better for us if we show up empty handed at the Final Judgment.