

All Souls' Day

SISTER DEATH

St Francis of Assisi, in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, praised God for all that he has made, and that included death, whom he described as a gentle sister:

And thou most kind and gentle death
waiting to hush our latest breath.

Thou ledest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

St Francis embraces a very positive view of death in contrast to most modern attitudes. We prefer not to talk about death, and the idea of making a good death – a common desire for many centuries – is meaningless to most people today. Death tends to evoke fear, not perhaps in itself, but the process of dying, which may be painful and prolonged, and agonising for those who watch and wait. And then there is the question of what lies beyond: can we hope for more than oblivion? In this atmosphere of confused feelings and deep doubts it is not surprising that the process of dying has been sanitised, kept out of sight, and left to the professionals to manage. But death is the one certainty that faces everyone, and it makes sense to regain a positive attitude to it, like that of St Francis who saw it as the way home to God.

Death comes to us all, and it does so because we are finite creatures. Because it is the only thing that will happen to everyone,

it is in fact the most significant thing about human existence. It is the horizon that closes off the future and gives perspective to life. If we lived for ever life would lack purpose; there would be no desire to order our lives because all could be accomplished in an infinity of time. But when we have lots of time it tends to be wasted and little is achieved. Without the prospect of death, life would be emptied of meaning and purpose. It is not too absurd to say that without death there would be no life worth living. This is part of the kindness of death of which St Francis spoke.

Another aspect of the kindness of death is the judgement it offers. Again, judgement is not something we speak about, but we all know how important it is to get our priorities worked out, and as we get older we become more concerned about who we are than about what we are. As the saying goes, 'You can't take anything with you when you go.' All you can take, in fact, is what you have become; in a word, your soul. Death exposes the superficiality and triviality of our material ambitions and aspirations, our devices and desires; and it poses the question: 'What has our life been about?'

We all know that we have fallen short, and fear that the judgement will go against us. But God's judgement is the judgement of love, not of a court of law; its aim is change, or repentance, not condemnation. Any other view is incompatible with a God of love. It is not possible that a God of love has created us only in order to let us die eternally if we do wrong. Rather, like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, he yearns for us to return

to him, and when we do, he runs towards us with open arms. Judgement concentrates the mind on the things that are eternal, and so death leads home the child of God.

Judgement is the other face of hope. To be confronted with reality is to be able to do something about it, to change, to take another path, to face the light. The prospect of living in the light is the hope that Jesus set before us, and those who have been baptised have already begun their journey into the light, and the life we live between baptism and our physical death is one with the life we shall live on the other side of death. St Paul, writing to the Colossians about baptism, he expressed the Christian hope in these words: 'You died, and now your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.' (*Colossians 3.3-4*) It is because Christ has gone before us that we can believe that he will come again and take us to himself, so that where he is we may be also. In the Father's house there are many dwelling places (*cf. John 14.1-3*). The resurrection is the sign that gives substance to our hope, and makes it real. It is in Christ that all is made new, and it is along the way that he has trod that the child of God is led home.

And where is home? Home is nothing less than God himself, and heaven is that close union and communion with him which he made us to enjoy and which we partially experience now in this service, in prayer, and in the love and companionship of our family and friends, especially those whom we remember tonight. Just as they

are held in our memory, so they are also held in the memory of God. The French doctor Pierre Janet, one of the pioneers of psychiatry who lived in the nineteenth century, said that in the human brain nothing is ever lost. It may be beyond beyond conscious recall, but its there, stored away – every experience, everything we have learnt and read. In the same way, nothing that he has made is lost by God; it is held in his memory. So, as we commemorate those who have died, we pray that their journey will be a continual turning towards the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who holds us in his memory even as he hushes our last breath.

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waiting to hush our latest breath.

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And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

Amen.