

"EASTER AND THE NEW UNMENTIONABLE"

TEXT: "...but the free gift of God is eternal
life in Christ Jesus our Lord"
(Romans 6:23 b)

INTRODUCTION Sex was the old unmentionable, but times have changed. In our society one might say that death is the unmentionable - the new unmentionable. Of course we don't come right out with it and declare death off-limits as a fit subject for conversation. Rather, we tend to immerse ourselves in the issues and problems of the here and now, and in so doing ease death off the docket. We have a way of bracketing ourselves off against life's larger questions, perhaps hoping that they'll go away. But they never do!

DEVELOPMENT But evidence is building that such secularization is not enough. For instance, last Spring a course at NYU on "The Meaning of Death" attracted some 200 students with many more wishing to get in, but unable to. Perhaps you know of similar happenings elsewhere.

A new organization has opened here in the city - the first of its kind in the country. Entitled, Roger Harris Associates, its main concern and only concern is to talk about death with people before it invades their lives and to assist them in facing and dealing with the concerns that inevitably must be faced. On the front of the brochure that describes this new service are the words: "Let's Talk About Death". And this quotation from von Keppler appears in small print at the bottom of the page:

"To think of death and to prepare for death is not a surrender; it is a victory over fear...."

And we might add - a victory brought about in part by one's religious faith and insights....insights given by his faith.

TRANSITION Here on this Easter Day, I propose that we look at death within the perspective of the Christian faith. And I invite you to consider with me three rhetorical questions on the subject of death:

What would life be without death?
What would death be without immortality?
What would immortality be without eternal life?

I. WHAT WOULD LIFE BE WITHOUT DEATH I think we tend to look upon death as public and private enemy number one. Man's ultimate tormentor...the villain in the story....the negation of all that's good.

And this is part of the reason why we like to camouflage death. Why else surround an open grave with artificial grass? Or pay so willingly and so generously for the cosmetic skills of the embalmer? Or avoid funerals where and when it is socially decent for us to do so? Or why else do we soften our speech about death - preferring "memorial park" or "garden of remembrance" to the word "cemetery", or "terminal illness" to the word, "dying". Why do we resent increasingly the "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" phrase of the committal service at the graveside?

Noel Coward in his play, "This Happy Breed" exposes our evasiveness. In the third act, scene one, Sylvia says, "There's not so much to do since Mrs. Flint

passed on". Frank replies, "I do wish you wouldn't talk like that, Sylvia - it sounds so soft." She replies, "' don't know what you mean". He replies, "Mother died, see! First of all she got the flu and that turned to pneumonia and the strain of that affected her heart, which was none too strong at the best of time, and she died. Nothing to do with passing on at all." Ethel asks, "What are you hollering about?" Frank responds, "I'm not shouting about anything at all. I'm merely explaining to Sylvia that motherdied. She didn't pass on, or pass over, or pass out....she died."

And yet - I press this question: what would life be like without death? Would it not be robbed of its zest and its challenge, and be greatly diminished in its grandeur? Isn't living something of an art precisely because we must do it within the limiting boundaries of birth and of death?

Once when Dr. Faunce was presiding over the affairs of Brown University, he gave a chapel talk on "The Pleasure of Economy". He pointed out that in games and sports the pleasure is found in demonstrating what can be done within the limitations imposed. For instance, in baseball the player at bat is limited to three strikes. Suppose he were allowed as many as he wanted....why the game of baseball would lose its fun and its interest for players and spectators alike. Some of you play golf. The golfer is permitted one drive at each tee and he must make that one ball go as far as he can. If he could keep on driving until the ball went a distance which satisfied him, golf would become too boring to play. Something of the same thing holds true with life.

George Eliot in her poem, "The Legend of Jubal" showed an unusual imagination as she mused on what it must have been like when word of the world's first death registered on the human consciousness. Listen to her words:

"It seemed the light was never loved before,
Now each man said, 'I will go and come no more'.
No budding branch, no pebble from the brook,
No form, no shadow but new dearness took....
From the one thought that life must have an end.
And the last parting now began to send
Diffusive dread through love and wedded bliss,
Thrilling them into finer tenderness".

Long ago the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes said, "There is a time for everything under the sun. A time to be born, and a time to die". It is a mercy, is it not, that this is so. For what would life be without death.

II. WHAT WOULD DEATH BE WITHOUT IMMORTALITY

On to the second question: what would death be without immortality?

The answer is summed up in one word - unbearable. Death is utterly intolerable apart from some view of immortality - and for many reasons. Death involves incompleteness. It often rings the curtain down too early and sometimes too late. It takes us with our work unfinished, our dreams unrealized, our obligations unfulfilled.

Death has a way of finalizing injustices. The good suffer. The scoundrels romp about unchecked. The heart insists that somewhere beyond this life the books must be properly closed and all accounts duly settled. As it says in the scriptures: "Should not the judge of all the earth do right?"

Death negates the soul's invincible surmise. Man insists on believing that there must be more to come. Most hold to the conviction that man's outlay of love and of courage cannot be justified within the range of three score years and ten.

For these and a host of other considerations, man has unfailingly and incurably believed in some manner of immortality. And he has clung to this conviction with the tenacity of a Walter Frazier up against a full court press. Sometimes he believes that he lives on only in the memory of his friends. Sometimes he believes it is only in the good that he has contributed to on-coming generations. But most of the time he has stoutly believed in the resumption of a personal identity on the other side in ways beyond the measure of his own human understanding. Certainly Cleopatra was speaking for more than herself when she said:

"Give me my robe, put on my crown;
I have immortal longings in me"

It is not death to die. This has been the cry of the human heart across the ages of civilization - at all times and in all places.

III. WHAT WOULD IMMORTALITY BE WITHOUT ETERNAL LIFE

Which brings us then to the third and final

question and which is the critical question for us on this Easter Day when we celebrate the fact of Christ's victory over death. What would immortality be without eternal life?

As you know, the basic idea behind immortality is extension. The dictionary suggests that immortality means "exempt from annihilation" Or again, "unending existence". We might put it this way - it simply means more of the same, AD INFINITUM.

And this in itself could be unwelcome...intolerable. The thought that an individual is destined to turn on the tiny axis of his own self forever and ever is not exactly a glorious hope, although some might think it is. I had to commend the honesty of that person who one time in my study said, "I can't think of anything more boring than that I should go on living forever". Remember this is the grim point of No Exit by John Paul Sartre - three individuals - two women and a man....find themselves in the region of the damned. But theirs is a pleasant place. The room is bathed in light. Their eyes are open; the civilities of life are observed. Then it becomes apparent that these three people will act upon each other and react to each other eternally. And this is the hell of it all.

This Gospel of Jesus Christ and His resurrection which we have come to celebrate on this glorious Easter Day has to do not with immortality, but with the deeper belief of an eternal life. The concept of immortality is basically something imported from Greek culture, and perhaps this is why the word "immortality" is found only 5 times in the New Testament, and the term "eternal life" appears some 27 times.

The early church labored to separate its hope from the prevailing Greek view. Austin Farrer, in his book, The Freedom of the Will, brought this point out:

"History shows us Christian belief turning, after some initial hesitations, against the equation of immortality with salvation;

salvation is what God does with the immortality of the re-
deemed; it is not their immortality itself".

Eternal life is not an endowment of nature - but rather it is a gift of grace,
and thus Paul, in writing to the Romans, could say:

"The wages of sin is death....but the free gift
of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord"

Eternal life is an "impertation" - a "disclosure" - not an inalienable
right. It is something that has to do with.....the "quality of life" and not
simply the "quantity of life". The eternal in the New Testament is not
uncharacterized duration. It is a filled magnitude - a Christ-filled magnitude.

And so it is that eternal life begins not when we die, but rather it begins
on that day when we first begin to really believe. George Knight, an Old Testa-
ment scholar, has written this line which is worth including in an Easter sermon:

"For the Christian - real death happens at the moment of his
baptism, with the result that when for him the clock strikes
twelve and he meets what we mortals call death, that moment
now loses its original significance".

The good and glorious news of Easter is that the triumph of Jesus Christ
is not a solitary triumph. He is not only living - but life-giving. "Because
he lives - we, too, shall live" - this is the great promise of the Gospel.
It is this faith we celebrate, and I believe it. And it was within the certain-
ty of this promise that Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress could describe the death of
"Mr. Valiant for Truth" in those unforgettable words:

"When the day that he must go hence was come,
many accompanied him to the riverside,
into which as he went, he said:
'Death - where is thy sting?'
And as he went down deeper, he said,
'Grave, where is thy victory?'

So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded
for him - on the other side"

What would life be without death? What would death be without immortality? What
would immortality be without the gift of eternal life? the glorious hope of faith for

PRAYER Lord, we believe so little and fear so much. If we have known the
Gospel only by hear-say, let this hour be for us the time when we
open our hearts completely to the spirit of the risen Christ - and then help us
to get serious - deeply seriously - about our real vocation as Sons of God. In
His name and in His spirit, we pray. Amen