

32nd Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *Eternal hope in the resurrection.*
November 5-6, 2016/ 5:15p, 8:00a, 10:00 a.m.
Readings: 2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

I am giving fair warning that I am going to speak about something this morning that I suspect most of you would prefer I not mention....not to worry, I am not going to speak about Tuesday’s election! All three readings today proclaim the presence of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit in the world, overcoming the power of evil and death. The Jewish martyrs, the prayer of Saint Paul and the testimony of Jesus all challenge us to rethink the priorities in our lives in light of the eternal hope to which we have been called.

Our reading from Maccabees was written towards the end of the Old Testament period and is one of the deuterocanonical books, accepted by Catholics as the inspired Word of God. It recounts how the Jews bravely fought off their Syrian enemies, who were attempting to abolish the Jewish temple and religion.

It was when the core beliefs were most challenged by new Greek ideas that the Jews rallied with courage to hold fast to their ways. The first reading is all about hope; the fourth martyr brother specifically mentioned that he died with the hope that God gave to him of being raised again. The brothers would not deny their core beliefs, even in order to save their lives.

As with other later books in the Old Testament, we gain hints of a developing belief in the afterlife. I make no claims to be well versed in Jewish theology, but I know enough to know that there is no single interpretation on these matters. One Rabbi from the first Century taught that “while a righteous person might suffer in this lifetime, he or she will certainly be rewarded in the next world, and that reward will be much greater.”¹

¹ Rabbi Ya’akov, cf. Pirkei Avot 4:21 for notion of the world to come)

Though a precise notion of the afterlife was unclear, some Jewish Rabbinic literature even expressed a general notion of *purgation* before entering the Garden of Eden and the heavenly realm. The Mishnah spoke of a judgment lasting twelve months. The Book of Maccabees clearly speaks of the practice of praying for the dead. For us Christians, we rely upon the teaching and example of Jesus, the witness of the Apostles and the teaching authority of the Church to give authoritative interpretations of various Old Testament texts. To arrive at our developed theology of the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

During this month dedicated to the Holy Souls, we would all do well to reflect upon the last things, including that of Purgatory. The response of faith is that nothing defiled can enter heaven,² and so anyone less than perfect must first be cleansed before being admitted to the vision of God. Most people assume that the belief in purgatory is considered a distinctively Catholic belief, when actually Eastern Orthodoxy subscribes substantially to Catholic teaching on the Last Things, including the doctrine on purgatory.

The poor souls in purgatory have not yet paid the temporal penalty due, either for venial sins, or for mortal sins whose guilt was forgiven before death. The Catholic practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead is known as offering “suffrages.” A suffrage is a prayer or pious work for a specific purpose, offered for the repose of a loved one’s soul. These suffrages are offered both by the individuals and by the Church, in hopes of obtaining for the poor soul, either partial or total remission of temporal punishment.

In his encyclical on Christian Hope, Pope Benedict XVI described purgatory in terms quite accessible for us today, highlighting our conviction that love can indeed reach into the afterlife, where our

² See Book of Revelation 21:27

affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death:

Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve... In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert earthly time into God's time: in the communion of souls simple terrestrial time is superseded.³

All throughout the Holy Year, we have been encouraged to receive the special grace of an indulgence, a particular grace offered this year focused on God's Mercy, to reconcile with one another. Death is the end of our earthly pilgrimage, a time of grace and mercy that God offers to man so that we might work out our earthly life in keeping with His plan. We should all pray for the grace to understand death, even our own future death, as a graced moment from God, part of our journey towards our loving Father. Saint Francis of Assisi, when he lay on his deathbed in 1228 added some words to his beautiful, *Canticle of the Creatures* (Sun):

Praised are you, my Lord, for our sister bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe on those who will die in mortal sin!
Blessed are they who will be found
in your most holy will,
for the second death will not harm them.

Our first death is the death to sin through Baptism. The second death, of a bodily nature, will not harm the person of faith. Let us pray for the grace to be willing to embrace these last things, as themselves a part of the journey towards the Father, with whom we hope to spend eternity, offering Him endless praise and thanks.

³ (*Spe Salvi*, #48, 30 November 2007)