

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR “C”

This past week I went to my sister, Cathy's, home on my day off. My sister Cathy is a fantastic cook and she and her husband Ken are very gracious hosts. Along with their two boys they have two shiz-tzus, who are great company for my dog, Bobo. In any case, during my visit this week, my sister and I were in the living room, Cathy was reading the newspaper and all of a sudden she began to read it aloud. She said, "There is a 40 year old. Oh, there's a 32 year old. Oh my, there's a 22 year old." Cathy was looking at the death notices. By no means is my sister a morbid person, nevertheless having buried both of our parents in the past few years, Cathy is a realist and she knows that death is a reality of life that cannot be denied.

In this month of November, the Church calls us to think about the mystery of death. This annual reflection on death began with the feast of All Saints on November 1, continued with the commemoration of All Souls on November 2, and now encompasses in virtually every parish an annual Memorial Mass for those who have died during the past year. (In our parish, that Mass will take place on Monday, November 8, at 7:00 PM.) This focus on death involves remembering our beloved dead all month long by inscribing their names in a Book of Remembrance, and/or visiting the cemetery. Above all, this reflection on death reaches its apex in the readings at Mass, all month long, which center in large part on death and the end times. Today's readings illustrate this point so well as they speak about eternal life.

This ecclesial call to meditate on the mystery of death can evoke all kinds of reactions ranging from anxiety to fear, denial to bewilderment. All of these realities can connote a particular negativity. And yet, this communal reflection need not be negative. Actually, it can be so positive, for death has such a sober way of awakening us to life. That said, to consider death is in many ways to appreciate life. Think about it. Many people who have had near-death experiences somehow embrace a more grateful prospective of life. And those who have lost loved ones in death, in time, gain a greater focus on life.

The key of course to facing, understanding, and dealing with death is faith. In a certain sense the only adequate response to that is faith. In fact, in the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, have faith in God and faith in me."

This living faith in God is personified in the brothers who were arrested for eating pork in today's first reading. Rather than succumb to the ways of the king, they are willing to face death. One brother states, "We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors." In his dying moment this brother adds, "You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the World will raise us up to live again forever." And when another brother faces this same fate we are told, "Even the king and his attendants marveled at the young man's courage, because he regarded his sufferings as nothing." Suffice to say, it takes not only faith, but also courage to embrace death. Interestingly enough, someone once defined courage as, "Fear that has said its prayers."

My brothers and sisters, it is understandable that the thought, let alone the word "death" conjures fear for all us. Much of that fear is based on our humanness, this fear is also rooted in the uncertainty and the unknown. The Christian person, however, acknowledges this fear, but meets it with faith that is both personal and communal. The personal dimension is expressed daily through prayer and the reality that like the song, "We walk by faith and not by sight." And it is shared communally every time we recite the Creed and say together, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

In 1968 when Senator Robert Kennedy was campaigning for the Democratic Presidential Nomination he spent a hot day in New York greeting some of the poorest people in Spanish

Harlem. At the end of the day, someone approached him and asked, "Senator, why are you doing this? Why are you running?" Kennedy replied, "Because I found something out I never knew, I found out that my world is not the real world."

You know we all can fall prey so easily to the trap of living in our own little world. It is a world that denies death and, like the Sadducees, ignores the Resurrection. It is a world at which we are the center and God is at the fringe. And yet, who are we kidding, because all we have to do is open the newspaper to the death notices and see clearly that death exists in our world. People die every day and one day, we know not that day nor the hour, our name will be among those listed in the obituaries.

May God give us all the faith that we need to live in the real world. But more importantly, may God give us the vision to "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."