

November 3rd 2024 - Rev Jo Smith

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

“Death, be not proud,” John Donne admonishes, echoing St Paul, “O death where is thy victory, O death where is thy sting?” The poet John Donne had been hit by death repeatedly. His wife died young, as did five of his twelve children. St. Paul had caused death as a young man, but after his encounter with the Living Lord, the only death that mattered to him was separation from Christ. Yet, they both knew unimaginable tribulation and sorrow which hit them hardest after their conversion. The gift of love through Jesus Christ does not save us from the reality and the sorrow of death. Even Jesus, confronted by the death of his dear friend Lazarus and the immense grief of his sisters, broke down and wept.

Today, as we remember those we have loved and lost and all the saints within the blessed communion, we are allowed to weep and to be sad. Even though we who trust in the resurrection know that there is a happy ending to our story are still allowed to cry in the sad parts. This kind of grief is a sign that we are human and that human connections matter. They mattered greatly to Jesus of Nazareth.

But we are also urged toward hope and not despair. "Did I not tell you," Jesus reminds the grieving Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

From all we read in the New Testament, the grave is not the absolute finale of the great act of life. "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible," St. Paul assures the people of the ekklesia in Thessaloniki. But we are not given any details as to what happens after death. Lazarus is nowhere quoted, even though his sisters and friends must have asked him what it was that he saw.

In his fascinating Christian fantasy of heaven and hell, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis describes dramatically his own strong conviction that, even after death, every person has a chance again and again to accept or reject the love of God. Not all accept the love offered, neither here nor on the other side. We can see this reality vividly here on earth. Today, of all days, opening our hearts to our Creator is an assurance of life that death cannot snatch from us. It is not that some are favored to enter Heaven and others are not; the decision remains ours, C. S. Lewis tells us.

Today, we are also reminded that on this earth, death is the great equalizer.

There is no difference between rich and poor when death arrives. Money and expensive medicines and interventions may alleviate some of the pain, it may even prolong life, but when death arrives, the rich die just as the poor die.

There are many rumors in today's world that the very rich are trying to prolong their lives; in medicine, there are even efforts to defeat death altogether. They may try and try, but inevitably we will all pass through the doorway that is death. That's how it is.

Everyone who has lived has died. That's simply how it is. For now. Most Christians believe that the Lord of Life, Jesus the Christ, brought Lazarus back from the dead, but that was for a little while, and he too eventually died. We Christians also believe that Jesus died on the cross, was buried, but rose again unto eternity. The Alpha is also the Omega. He is the only one. The New Testament contains promises to us that death is not the ultimate end, that despite the death of the body, we continue to live in the Lord. We trust those promises.

Our greatest problem in believing is that we live within Time and Space, but our dead have escaped these confines. So, we cannot imagine where they are, and how they are. But we trust in him who said, "I go to prepare a place for you."

On this day, the hope is that we will feel more intensely than ever the reality of the communion of saints and that all in the cloud of witnesses will become real to us as never before. We need to know that we are not alone. Despite disasters and unrest and wars and death, we are not alone. We have the sweet promise that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more.

We cling to the assurance of the One who said, "I am making all things new. . . I will be your God and you will be my children." Let us today remember all of God's children who have left us to enter the cloud of witnesses. Let us cry together with the psalmist:

Lift up your heads, O gates!

And be lifted up, O ancient doors!

That the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?

The Lord of hosts,

He is the King of glory.

Behold, he is making all things new. Amen