

HOMILY - EASTER VIGIL - 2006

If one scans the pagan mythology before and even after the time of Christ, the various myths may seem to be in dramatic contrast with each other. But there were some common themes running through them all. And one common theme is that death is final. Thus, in the Sumarian epic of Gilgamesh, the hero's friend dies and Gilgamesh goes on a quest to bring him back. He discovers that he can bring him back with a sacred flower buried in the depths of the sea. He goes and finds this flower; but, just as he is reaching out for it a fish comes, and eats it. The message: death is final.

Or take the Greek myth of Orpheus, the great musician. His wife dies, and he loves her so much that he goes into the underworld to bring her back. His music is so sweet that the god Pluto agrees that he can have her back if he only manages to lead her out without looking back to her until he is out of the underworld. He almost succeeds; but, just as he is reaching the earth again, his wife trips, he looks back, and he loses her forever. The message again: death is final.

Or take the Nordic myth of the god Baldur. The other gods are able to protect him from all things that could bring him death, but overlooked the possibility of him being pierced by mistletoe, thinking that instrument too weak. But a jealous god fashions mistletoe into a dangerous instrument and gets the other gods to strike him with it. And so he dies too. The message: death comes to all, and there is no reversing it.

Some religions have even gotten so far as to understand the idea of a suffering and dying god. Thus, the Hindu pantheon has three gods above all. And they believe that one of them, Vishnu, at some vague mythical time in the past, became human out of curiosity and love of humans. And they even believe that he was so caught up in love that he died of it. But that is it. He is gone, and the account remains a poignant story from a mythological past.

It was understood that the dead simply do not come back to life. There were various reactions to this understanding. Among the pagans, perhaps that most dignified was that of the Stoics, who responded to the fact that all things would die by believing that the key is not to love anything, but to remain remote from all things, so that at least death and loss would not cause sadness. The Platonists believed in a sort of escape through contemplation of eternal forms and the hope that, while the body would be lost, some part of the soul would somehow be subsumed into those forms. The Epicureans responded by seeking a life of pleasantness. On the surface level, they were content, but in the background there was sadness, for their motto was, "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." There were of course also those who figured that, if one could not avoid death, one would become an ally of it, seeking power over the life and death of others, and willing to search out in battle or even taking one's own life when life became tiresome.

The Jews had some better ideas. In their worship, they tried, at least for a time, to rise in spirit to the realm of God and His court, the realm above death. But they had to return again, and death was the end here. The prophets had spoken of an era to come, a time of a new heavens and a new earth, beyond death. But how that time would arrive, no one knew.

When we understand this background, we see how shocking it was when those first

Christians told the world that Jesus had risen. The disciples themselves had been slow to believe despite Jesus's clear words to that effect, for such a thing just did not happen. They were proclaiming that the king who had ruled over all people and kingdoms, death itself, was now overthrown. No one could reasonably argue, no one did argue at the time, that these first disciples were good people, just a little mistaken in their views. For someone may be reasonably mistaken about philosophical principles, scientific theories, political maxims or the like. But no sane person can say that he has seen a dead person rise again, unless he is right. And so the world looked on in wonder and often in anger, as those early Christians turned its schools of wisdom upside down.

But Jesus would give the world two more proofs, in addition to those early witnesses, most of whom died for this faith that they proclaimed. First, He promised a Church that would defy the laws of death: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the jaws of death will not prevail against her." From the days of the Roman Empire until now, the jaws of death have ever fought against the Church, and have ever failed. For she alone, among all institutions on this earth (the family excepted) has defied those laws of death, thundering throughout the ages. For she (and the natural family) alone, among institutions on this earth, is not of this earth, but from Christ as His bride. And, inseparable from the Church, is the second great reality, the Eucharist and the Mass, which Jesus gave us as a perpetual covenant to be renewed until the end of time, when the wedding feast of the Lamb and His Church, which the Mass promises, is at last fulfilled.

But, in the midst of Jesus' promise of life, through the Church and through the Eucharist, the world still sees death. The world often tries to escape from this reality, through distractions, excessive business, or the pursuit of pleasure, hoping to forget about that final reality, unwilling to embrace the Gospel of the only one who can overcome it. For example, in this county, as with most wealthy areas, it is nearly impossible to establish a new cemetery. Why? People do not wish to be reminded of death. Fewer and fewer people attend funerals, or visit graves of ancestors, for much the same reason. Or people seek refuge in vague, new age spiritualities that make little demand for moral reform, but still promise, on the basis of precious little evidence, that everything will still be all right in the end. People also go from those forms of escape to a positive embrace of death, dealing out death on those inconvenient people, such as the unborn, the handicapped and the terminally ill who are in the way, telling them that they really wouldn't have enjoyed life anyway. They imagine they are being progressive, not realizing that the pagans of old, and especially the Romans, did exactly the same thing two millennia ago.

It was the Christians who two thousand years ago proclaimed the radical new message of the resurrection. Jesus had already outdone every pagan tragedy in His own life and death, having loved the world more than anyone could, having proclaimed a message of hope by His words and deeds greater than anyone ever had before, and then having been rejected and brutally killed by the very ones He loved. But then He won a triumph greater than any pagan had imagined, and gave the world the Church and the Mass to proclaim this triumph. And, a thousand years from now, when all of the human institutions, all the power, wealth, and pleasure of this world, is a distant memory, the Church and the Mass will continued to proclaim to the world, "He is risen." And, if we will join Him, all the good things of this earth, all talents and good works, all prayer and true love, while they may be temporarily lost by death, will be

restored, thirty, sixty and a hundred fold, in the kingdom of God, the kingdom beyond death.

Today, we welcome five new Christians, who will join with Jesus through their baptisms, rejecting all the forces that subject them to death, and accepting Jesus as the Lord of Life. We will welcome two more, who have joined with Him already, but will now join the Church He established and received our Lord in the Eucharist for the first time, the Eucharist which, as Jesus promises, gives us even now, a share in everlasting life. We will also welcome seven more, who have been with us in the Church, but now will receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in the Sacrament of Confirmation. And all of us will renew our own baptismal promises in which we reject sin and Satan, rejecting those forces of death, and instead, pledging our lives anew to Jesus Christ, who is the same, yesterday, today, and always, the One who leads us to everlasting and glorious life.