

## ***In search of immortality***

***We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.***

This week we mark two important days in our Church Year, All Saints on Friday and All Souls on Saturday. The Solemnity of All Saints is a remembrance of all the saints and we find the origins of this practice in the first few centuries CE. During the time of the persecution of Christians by the Romans, the anniversaries of the martyrs were remembered, but as their numbers increased, a particular day was set aside to remember all those 'saints' who had died, both those known and unknown.

Today, on this occasion, we remember all whose lives of faith are examples to us all. The Feast of All Souls is a remembrance of all who have died and a time to offer prayers for them. Around the world there are many cultural-religious practices associated with this day and ways of honoring the dead. This commemoration leads us to think about life, death, and of course, immortality. What might this be? What language and images might we use to convey a sense of it? Throughout the history of secular thinking and philosophy, as well as religious thought and beliefs, many ideas and concepts of immortality have arisen and current thinking is no different, for today too there are many ways in which this is understood.

There is a kind of immortality that some people achieve which comes from their contribution to humanity, to the world, to the Arts and Sciences. What they did or created continues to live on and to delight and bring joy, to improve people's lives, to inspire, challenge and comfort. A great figure such as Martin Luther King Jr lives on through his powerful words and actions which people draw on as they fight their own battles against exploitation and racism. Mother Teresa needs no introduction beyond the mention of her name and her endeavours likewise inspire others to go and do the same. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven continue to take us into that place of sublime beauty and transcendence where the soul is nourished. The legacies and creativity of so many gifted people and so many people of goodness and self-sacrifice, enrich our world and make it a better place for their having been in it.

Then there is the immortality which resides in the hearts and memories of people as the stories of their ancestors and loved-ones are told and re-told with affection, passed on in the family history, listened to in awe and held dear. We take great delight in seeing the personality traits or the talents and gifts of family members who have passed away come to expression in ourselves or in our children generations after they have lived and passed on, and it is common to hear people console one another at times of loss with the comforting thought that their beloved mother or grandparent will live on in them. And all this makes life beautiful, rich and meaningful. But what about the bigger picture of immortality, beyond the here and now, beyond the memories, the stories, the inspiring words and the contributions to the good of humanity? What about eternal life? How do we speak meaningfully today of what is presented to us in the Old

Catechism: “God made me to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world and to *be happy forever with him in the next*”? What are the language and the concepts around this that will reflect the context of a twenty-first century cosmology and worldview? One ancient understanding of immortality which has become quite popular in various circles today reflects our ecological sensitivity, the interconnectedness of all forms of life, and that is the view that we will live on in the earth, in the cycles of nature as our bodies are committed to the earth and we become part of the life-death-life cycle of nature. But is there more?

In his book, *Praying a New Story*, Michael Morwood responds to this need for new imagery and concepts and offers some compelling language for us today. In his reflection on death he writes: “What happens in death? This remains one of the questions most asked by Christians who have abandoned dualistic images of heaven and earth and images of souls leaving this place of ‘exile’ and going ‘home’ to heaven. Those images gave comfort and assurance, but for people embracing a different worldview, death is more mysterious than ever and there are no clear images. We believe we live *in* God and that death will be a transformation into another way of existing on *in* God”. From a western perspective our worldview has certainly undergone a vast change. The traditional Christian images of heaven and hell no longer speak to many people today. They arose out of a very different cosmology: a three-tiered universe with the underworld below, the earth in the middle, and heaven above. As time went by and that cosmological understanding changed, much of the imagery, however, remained. Without recourse to particular images around the concept of immortality, Morwood says that death is “a transformation and a continuation of the ebb and flow of existence in ways we do not understand”. With this in mind, the words of Jesus himself might be just the right starting point for a reflection on immortality: “I have come so that you may have life, and have it to the full”! It is this life, in abundance, in all its fullness, that, as Morwood says, we *live in* and we will continue to live into in a new, transformed way. It is this life, the abundant life of God, which we are invited to see and to surrender to, here and now. The visionary poet, William Blake, captures this beautifully: “To see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour”. It is right here, in each moment, that we tap into immortality, the eternal, as we see and surrender to what we call in Catholic teaching, ‘the sacrament of the present moment’. It is a turning to the Life Jesus knew, surrendered to, *lived into* and *died into*. We need to find our way into it too.

The Greek writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, in his book, *Zorba the Greek*, tells the following story: “I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited awhile, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out

patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand. That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm”.

*We should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.* What profound wisdom for the spiritual journey! Kazantzakis presents us with a metaphor for life. Hold the cocoon tenderly, lovingly, wait upon it, allowing the life within to take shape and emerge, trusting its slow, secret work, knowing it will emerge, for it is the eternal rhythm. In the same way we are invited to look upon ourselves, the universe, all life. We live in a world where all things are almost instantaneously available. It's as if we have constantly before us a giant supermarket shelf, and we can pick and choose and be immediately gratified. This is enhanced by the moral relativism of a world which says that all truths are of equal value, and individualism, which says that it's all about what feels good and right for me. But God and the abundant life which is offered to us, day by day, are not commodities to be selected and tried and rejected if they do not immediately provide what we desire. Surrender to the fullness of life, the eternal, does not happen instantaneously, nor is it subject to our manipulation or even our expectations. To truly know it, we need to reclaim something of the sacred longing and waiting that the psalmist wrote of. “For God alone my soul waits in silence” (Psalm 62), was the profound declaration two and a half thousand years ago, and, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God; My soul thirsts for God, the living God; When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Psalm 42), is the heart-felt prayer from ancient Israel. In our world of immediate gratification these thoughts seem almost quaint and the value of longing almost a foreign concept. We want to be filled, quickly, and we can be tempted to settle for less than what will ultimately fill us. But the waiting, the longing, the turning-toward, cannot be ignored, and we each need to find our own path there.

Simone Weil was a mystic of the twentieth century, a French lay woman, who had a profound understanding of that longing and the waiting which is so necessary a part of its fulfillment. Her book, *Waiting for God*, is a collection of her letters and essays that were compiled after her death by two friends, Father Perrin, a French priest and confidant, and Gustave Thibon, a lay theologian. She says: “At the center of the human heart is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world”. This echoes those words of St Augustine, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You”. Nothing less will do. When our restless hearts settle on God and settle into God, we taste immortality. At some point in our lives, each one of us will feel restless, as if our lives are too narrow, too confined, too small. That search for what will ultimately open us to life in its fullness can take many forms. The mediaeval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, asked:

“What is the adequate object of the human mind and heart?” What will fully satisfy us? And his answer was, “All being, everything”!

It is part of our very make-up that at some level we long for eternity, for transcendence. Our spiritual teachings remind us that anything other than God will not do. What is required is a lifelong journey into deeper and deeper attentiveness to God, to wake up, to listen, to see. Weil says that we must let go of our willful striving and start paying attention, waiting for God to come to us in grace. She writes: “We can only turn our eyes toward God. We do not have to search for God, we only have to change the direction in which we are looking. It is for God to search for us”. The action is God’s, the initiative is God’s, the turning and the waiting are ours. But this does not happen according to our time frame. As William Blake wrote: He who binds to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy; / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity’s sunrise”.

Buddhist teaching has a beautiful image which is helpful as we think about this waiting, this gracious pace which is not our own, but to which we must surrender: *How does an apple ripen? It sits in the sun.* Well, what does it mean for us to sit in the sun? What does it mean to set our souls in silence? How do we in fact wait for God? As William Wordsworth said, “But trailing clouds of glory, do we come ...” (*Intimations of Immortality*). How do we hold onto this? There is much to distract us and diminish us.

We need to prioritise. Does this life in abundance matter? Does this matter enough to me to give my heart to it? There are many inspiring words in our sacred writings which remind us of this: “Where your treasure is there will your heart be too”; “Do not worry about what you will eat, what you will drink ... seek first the kingdom of God and Gods’ righteousness”; “As you sow so shall you reap”. We need to weed out what is unimportant. We need to resist the pressure to conform to priorities that culture, society, others may hold to. When we look at an elite athlete we see someone who has made choices, who gives up what gets in the way of the goal she has set. In the same way, if we are to surrender to the life that is God we will find that we simply do have to make choices. “Live by the Spirit”, says Saint Paul, and he goes on to say that the sign that we are living by the Spirit will be the blossoming of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives (Galatians 5:16, 22-23). When we live by the Spirit, in other words, when we let God have God’s way with us, we are living in the eternal ‘moment’. The heart of a Christian life is a life transformed, a life of love. As we listen and follow in the way of Jesus, we become Christ-like, and we surrender all that is not of God.

This is a life-long journey - and beyond too. We live into God. As Morewood writes, “We remember how Jesus of Nazareth, by the way he lived and died and by what he believed, led us to recognize and name our intimate connectedness with God in our everyday actions of human caring and loving. He inspired us to walk trustingly in life with God, the Source of all life. And

he showed us how to face death – not with fear of the unknown, but with faith and trust that love has an eternal dimension to it”. And as we do this we will find ourselves right in the heart of God, caught up into, and transformed into, what is eternal: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1John 4:16).

*“There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou — Thou art Being and Breath,  
And what Thou art may never be destroyed”.*

Emily Bronte

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