



Thirty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time November 12, 2017 A

- **At Heaven's Gate**
- **A Hopeful Grieving**

At Heaven's Gate

The following two reflections on today's Gospel and Second Reading (on grief) are by Fr. Flor McCarthy.

The other night I found myself walking towards the gate of heaven. On the way there I ran into some figures in the dark who were crying. 'Why are you crying?' I asked. 'We're crying because the Lord refused to let us in. He said he didn't know us,' they replied. I arrived at the gate to find it locked. So with some hesitation and no little trepidation I rang the bell, knowing that it was the Lord himself who would answer.

As I stood there waiting, a terrifying question arose in my mind: Will he know me? Of course he'll know me! Ah, yes, but will he recognize me as a disciple of his? That's the question. And it's one I can't do anything about now. It's too late to change anything. I dreaded the thought that I might find myself excluded, an outsider, alone.

What's he going to look for? I asked myself. Then I thought of the parable of the lamps. He will look for a lamp that is burning brightly. What have I done with my lamp? 'Oh, good, I still have it,' I exclaimed. But when I looked at it I found to my horror that it had gone out.

However, at that moment I woke up to find that it was only a dream. What a relief! It was just a warning that the Lord in his goodness had given me to wake me up, to shake me out of my sloth and carelessness.

Wouldn't it be terrible to arrive at heaven's door, to knock and then to have the Lord come out and say to you, 'I do not know you,' and you find yourself

outside alone in the dark, while inside all is light, joy, community, and celebration.

What lamp are we talking about? Essentially, it is the lamp of love. Love, in order to be genuine, doesn't have to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired or cynical.

How does a lamp burn? Through a continuous input of small drops of oil. If the drops of oil cease, the lamp will go out. What are these drops of oil in our lamps? They are the small things of daily life: faithfulness, punctuality, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our way of being silent, of looking, of speaking, and of acting. These are the drops of love that keep our religious life burning like a lively flame.

Jesus shared our life, our loneliness, our anguish, our death. He is not far away from us. He is very close to us. We can touch, serve, and love him every day of our lives. With the oil of prayer and good works we must keep the lamp of faith burning, and he will recognize us. We won't be judged on a momentary lapse, but on our life as a whole.

Since we do not know the day nor the hour of the Lord's coming, we must be prepared so that when he comes we can enter his kingdom. To be prepared means to be a doer rather than a mere hearer of the Word.

All that Jesus says to us in this parable is meant as a warning. This warning is a sign of his love for us. It tells us that every moment should be beautiful. That the soul should always be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, always waiting for the voice of the Beloved.

A hopeful grieving

While the Gospel is talking about rejoicing, the Second Reading is talking about grieving. Both are part of life and can be very close to each other. Today I may be attending a wedding, tomorrow a funeral.

The early Christians believed that Jesus would return soon and take them all to heaven. This made it difficult for them to accept the death of some of their members before Jesus returned in glory. In the Second Reading we heard Paul reassuring the Thessalonians. He tells them that as surely as God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus will raise those who have died, and present them to God in the final showing of his Kingdom.

But meanwhile they are grieving. What should be their attitude to grief? He didn't tell the Thessalonians that they should not grieve. What he said to them was: 'Do not grieve like those who have no hope.' Grief is not an easy thing to handle. You still find people who directly or indirectly discourage it.

Vincent had recently lost his wife, and was now living on his own. He was still in the early stages of a very deep grief. Her death left not only a great void in his life, but a great silence too.

To their credit, his grown children visited him regularly. However, they made sure not to bring up the one subject he desperately wanted and needed to talk about, namely, the death of his wife. They said they didn't want to upset him. So they acted as if nothing had happened, and expected him to do the same. Even though they meant well, they were not helping him. He had to do his grief-work. That grief was all the greater for not being shared.

Grief follows the loss of a loved one as surely and naturally as night follows day. Grief is one of the strongest emotions we will ever experience. Many people have a problem about expressing grief, and may try to suppress it. To suppress grief is dangerous, and can result in serious emotional problems.

To live fruitfully after the death of a loved one, people need to go through a period of mourning. The way to deal with grief is not to run away from it, or pretend it isn't there, but to face it and work through it with as much honesty and courage as one can.

Those who do this will emerge enriched as a person. Grief has a great purgative value. God cannot fill the soul until it is emptied of trivial concerns. And a great grief is a tremendous bonfire in which all the trash of life is consumed.

Faith should not be used as a barrier against grief. Sometime people say about someone who does not grieve, 'What great faith he (she) has!' But even Christ grieved. To grieve over the loss of a loved one is a good and necessary thing.

While faith doesn't do away with the necessity of grieving, it is a wonderful comfort and support at a time of death. Paul says, 'We believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died in Christ.... Comfort one another with these thoughts.' Faith doesn't dispense us from grieving. What it does do is enable us to grieve with hope.

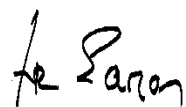
There's no escaping the work of grief, and there can be no economizing in that work. If we suppress it now, it will burst out later, when there's another death to mourn or another anniversary.

We mustn't be afraid to cry, to let ourselves go. It's part of the healing. We have tears in our eyes but hope in our hearts. If we do the work of grief, we will wake up one morning, liberated and full of energy for life.

The wedding feast to which Jesus invites us will be all the more joyful for those who have walked through the dark valley of grief, and emerged with the lamp of love still burning brightly.

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Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.