

THE LAST THINGS

AS THIS ISSUE of *Compass* goes to the press we are at the end of the Church's year, and our attention turns to the 'last things'. November is the 'Month of the Holy Souls' when we pray for our deceased loved ones, and the liturgy directs our reflections to the life after death which is promised to us. God, we are told, is the God of the living.

Life after death is new life, not a continuation of our earthly life. 'In death life is changed, not ended' (Preface of Christian Death I). Death is a transition to fuller life.

Christ by his death and resurrection converted our death into the gateway to life eternal. 'Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died' (1Cor 15:20). Christ died so that we might live. Through Christ's dying and rising from the dead: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death, is your sting?' (1Cor 15:54-55)

But we must die with him as the second letter to Timothy insists: 'This saying is sure: if we have died with him, we shall also live with him' (2Tim. 2:11). Dying and rising with Christ is the pattern of the Christian life—taking up one's cross and following him.

It begins at baptism. When we are baptised we are baptised into his death so as to rise to life with him: we go into the tomb with him and rise with him to new life. And this is the story of our lives every day—dying with Christ in order to live with him. And when we come to the end of our earthly life it is our faith that we die with him to enter into life eternal with him.

At funerals I draw attention to the Easter Candle that stands tall at the foot of the casket. I point out that, apart from the Easter season when this candle is prominent in the church as we celebrate Christ's resurrection, it is

brought out for only two occasions—for baptisms and for funerals, because both are celebrations of entry into life with Christ.

But we can refuse to die and rise with him, we can refuse to follow Christ. In Luke's Gospel (Lk 14:15-21) Jesus presents such a refusal as a rejection of an invitation to a great banquet. 'A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many...' A number of those invited gave excuses and sent their apologies. The master was angered by their refusals and sent his servants out into streets and lanes of the city, and told them to bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame. These latter accepted the invitation! But there was still room, and the master told the servants to go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in—he wanted his house to be filled. (Lk 14:15-24)

Accepting that the master conveys something of God's action and God's invitation to us to the banquet of life, we must be impressed by the strong, forceful and inclusive action of God. But still we must accept the invitation—powerful as God's mercy and love is, and wonderful as what God is inviting us to is, God deals with us as people with free will, and we can still say 'No'. Missing out is a real possibility. As the master said in Jesus' story, 'Those others will never taste my feast!' But while it is possible to reject God's invitation, we are not able to say that anyone has ever done so.

We proceed on the presumption that it is well-nigh impossible to miss out. Jesus himself seemed to indicate as much. He said, 'There are many mansions in my Father's house' (Jn 14:2). We rely on the power of God's love and mercy. At funerals of people who have not been active in practicing the Christian faith, we fall back on such claims as: 'In his/her heart he/she longed to do your will', and we take comfort from the thought

that for God that will be enough to welcome that person and prepare him or her to enter into his peace.

All of us, however, need to complete our conversion before we can meet God face to face. In death we stand before God and our need for further conversion will be apparent. We call this the Particular Judgment. Our unreadiness to enter into God's presence—into heaven—becomes apparent as we come to stand in the presence of our loving and holy God. We can be made ready, fully converted, by God's purifying grace and the prayers of those who pray for us. This process of painful purification and conversion is called 'Purgatory'.

If a person's whole life has been a story of selfishness and evil, ultimately a rejection of God and God's ways, there is a real danger that at the moment of death that choice will be confirmed. We cannot say whether anyone actually is so insistent in their rejection, but it is important to understand that God does not condemn a person to Hell—it is the lot that a person chooses for him or herself that confirms the way that person has lived. God has made us for himself, as St Augustine said, and our hearts are restless till they rest in him. The person who rejects God and God's love even when he or she comes face-to-face with God condemns himself or herself to eternal frustration.

Indeed, it is only just that people who are responsible for great evils and cruelties and who are unrepentant—have not experienced remorse and if possible made restitution in some way—should suffer the penal-

ties for their evil deeds. But God does not condemn them to Hell—they choose Hell for themselves.

Once we have negotiated Purgatory and our conversion and purification is complete we will be fit to 'enter' Heaven. God's grace will have made us like God and we will see him as he is, face to face (1Jn 3:2); this is called the 'beatific vision'. We will enjoy the presence of God; this will be the source of our bliss. God's love will overwhelm us. 'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1Cor. 2:9). 'Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.1024).

Some religious groups proclaim from time to time that 'the end is nigh'. The early Christians believed that the second coming of the Messiah was imminent. By the end of the New Testament period Christians no longer expected that it would be soon. In Luke's gospel Jesus discouraged his disciples from speculating about it and urged them to concentrate on the present time and its challenges (Lk 21:5-19). But there will be an end of time when the Kingdom of God will come in its fulness; there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1042-1050).

What we are waiting for is what he promised: the new heavens and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home. (2Peter 3:13).

—**Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.**

The beatific vision is the full union of the human person with God. It is that towards which every person strives. It is that which transcends the person on this earth and draws the person beyond herself or himself to become something other than she or he is at present. It is the goal of every human inquiry, search, and gesture towards the other. It is the completion of all that we are as human beings.

—**Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, p.1166.**