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Elizabeth Shaw, *Editor*

To Bear the Beams of Love

By Regis Martin

September 30, 2018 – Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Numbers 11.25-29; James 5.1-6; Mark 9.38-43, 45, 47-48

*And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.*
– William Blake

The desire for God is a drive so deeply inscribed in the human heart that nothing in this world exists to extinguish it – save only that self wholly determined on its own destruction. Why this should be so is perfectly plain; indeed, it is an axiom intrinsic to the architecture of the human person: we are made for God, and without God the heart remains ever restless in its primal need for him. Saint Augustine wisely intuited this in his *Confessions*, and Saint Thomas, who often adverts to that “habitual” hunger of the soul for the Absolute, dares to posit God himself as implicit in every act of thinking and willing. (See *De veritate* XXII, a. 2, ad 1.)

Ours is a God, faith tells us, whose love for us is stronger even than death, a God in whose own heart we have already been inscribed from all eternity. “Before I formed you in the womb,” he tells us, “I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you” (Jer 1.5).

The Four Last Things

We are awaited, therefore, both now and at the hour of our death. Whatever misfortunes come our way, they cannot finally undo that love – unless, once again, we choose to refuse the invitation, taking ourselves straight to hell, where the door is always locked on the inside.

Death, then, is the first of the four Last Things ever to be remembered. It is the key through which we first enter the door that leads to eternal life, which is why we ought not to fear death, since otherwise we cannot fall into the arms of God.

“So death will come to fetch you?” asks Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who, despite the awful torment of her own death, possessed a hope as nearly boundless as God himself. “No, not death, but God himself. Death is not the horrible specter we see represented in pictures. The catechism teaches that death is the separation of the soul from the body; that is all. I am not afraid of a separation which will unite me forever with God.” Fortified thus by faith, she moved with serene and childlike trust through death, its terrors deflected by her lively sense of the *always more* aspect of divine mercy.

If *death*, then, is the first of the finalities we face, *judgment* is what necessarily follows, the collision with which will fix forever the two bookends of *heaven* and *hell*. An unending prospect of loss or gain – perdition or paradise – awaits us on the far side, defining forever the full measure of a man’s life.

Love versus Solitude

On what will the acid test of admission finally turn, if we are to escape the one in order to embrace the other? *Love*. “The unfamiliar Name,” declares the poet T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*, “Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove. / We only live, only suspire, / Consumed by either fire or fire.” On the sincerity and strength of our love, Saint John of the Cross advises, “at the evening of our life, we shall be judged.” Only those unwilling to show love, especially to the ones most in need of it, will find themselves cut off, every blessed bridge to beatitude blown apart by their hell-bent and self-centered pursuits.

“What is Hell?” asks Father Zossima in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. “I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.” It is when the self, frozen in the ice of an eternal indifference, says to God, “I don’t want to love. I don’t want to be loved. I want only to be left alone.” And God, who suffers the soul to exercise even this most ultimate of rejections, will not prevent the soul’s descent into an everlasting solitude. “If there is damnation,” muses the narrator of Andre Dubos’s short story “Rose,”

and a place for the damned, it must be a quiet place, where spirits turn away from each other and stand in solitude and gaze haplessly at eternity. For it must be crowded with the passive: those people whose presence in life was a paradox . . . who witnessed evil and lifted neither an arm nor a voice to stop it, as they witnessed joy and neither sang nor clapped their hands.

The only thing necessary for evil to triumph, a wise man once said, is for good men to do nothing. Neither to object to, nor actively to oppose, the forces of darkness is, in effect, to help advance the evil that wicked men do. At the end of the day, in the sight of God, the sins of Pilate and of Cain are the same. Not to cry out against injustice will, in the end, be tantamount to having committed it. There are really only three kinds of people, as some anonymous wit once wrote: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. Of these, the latter are surely candidates for hell, the impacted weight of their indifference drawing them inexorably down into doom.

So portentous are the stakes in the struggle – the ongoing, titanic struggle between good and evil, between sin and sanctity – that in today’s passage from Mark’s gospel Jesus himself weighs in: he flat out tells us that whether it be hand or foot or eye causing us to sin, it is better by far to cut out the offending appendage than to be thrown into Gehenna complete with all body parts intact. Not much wiggle room for the wicked there.

Before the Judgment Seat

What exactly qualifies one as wicked? Again, the refusal to love – the “harsh and dreadful” practice of which, says Dostoevsky, will prove to be very different indeed from the soft soap and sentimentality of a play-acting love, a love unwilling to sacrifice either for God or for neighbor.

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother,” Saint John tells us in his first letter (4.20), “he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” And so, rather than rooting one’s life in God and neighbor, in the expectation of having to reckon with God at the last, one lives entirely for oneself, the comfort zone growing ever larger every day. In today’s second reading, the Apostle James inveighs most fiercely against such sinners, whom he describes as people condemned to “weep and wail over impending miseries, their wealth rotted away.” All that “gold and silver,” he warns, “has corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like fire.” In other words, those who culpably “have stored up treasure for the last days,” and will not share it with the poor, will have much to answer for.

Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.
(2 Jas 5.16)

What a sobering assessment to be exacted of each of us as we stand before the judgment seat of God! Dante was surely right in reminding us in the *Paradiso* that “in his will is our peace.” But if we refuse his peace? If we elect not to obey, thwarting the divine will itself, what then? What is the result of rejecting him, of waging total war against God Almighty? The answer is terrifyingly clear. Like Lucifer and his Legions of the Lost, we take ourselves to hell, “where their worm does not die and the fire is never quenched.”

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For Further Reading

Benedict XVI, [*“Saint Paul \(12\). Eschatology: The Expectation of the Parousia”*](#)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1020-1065](#)

[*“Five Insights on Death and Dying from St. Thérèse of Lisieux”*](#)

David Werning, [*“What We Believe about the Four Last Things”*](#)

In Short . . .

- *The desire for God is so deeply inscribed in the human heart that nothing can extinguish it – save only that self wholly determined on its own destruction.*
- *Death is the key through which we enter the door that leads to eternal life, and so we ought not to fear death; otherwise we cannot fall into the arms of God.*
- *Only those unwilling to show love, especially to the ones most in need of it, will find themselves cut off from beatitude.*
- *To love as God wants us to is very different from the soft soap and sentimentality of a play-acting love, a love unwilling to sacrifice either for God or for neighbor.*
- *The result of rejecting God is terrifyingly clear: like Lucifer and his Legions of the Lost, we take ourselves to hell.*

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