

Lose your life to find it

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

August 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you're feeling down because of the pandemic, then what you need is something to cheer you up. How about a book on the end of all existence? One recently published is called "The End of Everything." The author is the theoretical astrophysicist Katie Mack. In her book she writes about the end of the Universe, and estimates when that is likely to happen. There's good news for earth dwellers like you and me: if all goes well, we have five billion years left, after which the earth turns to slag and the sun begins to die.

However, the bad news is, we may not last that long. The entire universe itself could end via something called "vacuum decay." I won't try to explain what that is, but it creates something called the "quantum bubble of death", which moves through space at the speed of light, destroying all it touches. The author describes it as a kind of "manufacturer's defect in the fabric of the cosmos." She then asks the very practical question, "Do we still have to take the trash out next Tuesday if the universe is going to die some day?" The answer I will give, and I'm sure all parents will agree with me, is "yes, you still have to take out the trash, because there is a strong probability the universe will still be around next Tuesday."

Talking about the end of the universe and the end of life reminds me of something Woody Allen once said: "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Today I want to talk to you about life and death. Those two subjects are not ones we usually engage with, maybe because they are subjects which require serious discussion and we want something lighthearted these days. However, they have come up in our gospel reading and Jesus' words require our serious attention. In particular, there is one sentence on which I want to focus. Jesus says, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

It's a sentence I used to skim over, because it seems obvious to me what Jesus is saying, and I can relate it to the persecution of the early church, when Christians were made to choose between loyalty to God or loyalty to Caesar. In the first three centuries AD, standing up for your Christian faith really was a matter of life and death. Those who professed their first loyalty to God were often arrested, tortured and fed to the lions. But the life they lost on earth was regained in heaven, for Christians knew that it was the life of the soul which counted more than the life of the body.

Our lives are bound with the resurrected Christ, and so when he says to us, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it," what does this mean for me in my day to day life? We are fortunate to live in a land of freedom - indeed, many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century immigrants came to this country in order to be able to express and practice their religion freely. My own great-great-great-great grandfather was one such person - he was a non-conformist who came to Philadelphia in 1805 to escape the persecution in England.

Today, in other parts of the world, such as Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, the persecution of Christians continues. Let us not forget that these Christians, who are baptized like you and me, are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore we have an obligation to give them aid, and we can do this through the Barnabas Fund, an international organization which helps persecuted Christians throughout the world.

We value life above all else, and yet, if life was all about living, why does Jesus talk about dying and living in the same breath? Is there a closer connexion between life and death than we realize? Is death something which comes at the end of life, or is death present throughout our lives? What can death teach us about life? Why do those who lose their life find it?

In the Book of Common Prayer, in the Order for the Burial of the Dead, we have these words: "In the midst of life we are in death." These words reflect the fragile nature of human existence and remind us that life can end at any time. In Luke's gospel Jesus tells the story of a man who stores up provisions for himself during a time of great abundance. The man says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. (Luke 12:13-21)

The message from Luke's gospel is that hoarding and pure self-concern lead to death, not life. The paradox is that the man believed his life was fulfilled because he had abundantly provided for himself. His delusion was fatal, because in his abundance he had left no room for the things of God. Death was truly the end. The man had not taken account of his own soul and that had left him unprepared for death.

What more can death teach us about life? Death is absolute, but sometimes we use the language of death to express breakthroughs in our spiritual life. We talk about "dying to self" as a way of making space in our lives for God and becoming less egotistical. Ancient scholars would sit at a writing desk and on the desk there would be a skull, which would remind the scholar of their own mortality. It wasn't there to make you morbid, but rather intensify your feeling of being alive, and from a scholar's point of view, to get on with the work.

What death teaches us is the need to take life seriously. Which means to believe that your life is precious to God and, if that is so, how do you live a life with God? Well, to live a life with God means you aren't thinking about yourself the whole time. You may need to die to your own self-importance - which means you take yourself less seriously in order to take life more seriously.

There's a nice example I want to share with you of something President Carter, who was raised in the Baptist Church, said years ago in an interview, when he was asked if he feared assassination. He replied, "

"Well, in the first place, I'm not afraid of death. In the second place, it's the same commitment I made when I volunteered to go into the submarine force. I accepted a certain degree of danger when I made the original decision, then I didn't worry about it anymore...It's part of my religious belief. I just look at death as not a threat. It's inevitable, and I have an assurance of eternal life." That was from 1976.

Why do those who lose their life find it? This question goes to the heart of what life is about. Apart from death, there is something else which teaches us about life, and that is love. When Jesus spoke to the disciples, he was preparing them for his own death. For their lives he gave up his own. This is the purest example of love. In the gospel of John we hear Jesus tell them that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Paradoxically, it is this self-sacrificing love which leads to life. The purpose of life is not to cling onto it or hold onto it at all costs, but to offer it up to the source of life so that your life may be blessed and consecrated to God. That’s a fantastic and beautiful meaning, but it comes with the idea that your life is no longer your own, but is bound with Christ. And if your life is now bound with Christ, as it is in baptism, then his gift of self must penetrate your own understanding about what life means. Jesus sets an example for us to follow of sacrificial self-giving, which must be part of how you now think of your own life.

So if your life is bound with Jesus’ life, then you are already inhabiting two places: earth and heaven. Death, which has taught us so much about the meaning of life, no longer holds us in fear. Being confident in the faith, and offering our life to Christ, death cannot conquer us because, as St Paul once said, we are “dying, and behold we live.” Our life is precious, but our life can also be offered up as a sacrifice to God. Give yourself to God, therefore, give your whole life to God, and be alive in Christ, the savior of the world: be alive in Christ, the savior of your soul.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford