I. Death

Preparing to remember the first coming of Our Lord at Bethlehem has always been seen as an opportunity to reflect on his second coming at the end of time. In the 300s AD, in his instructions to new Christians, St Cyril of Jerusalem said,

> We do not preach only one coming of Christ, but a second as well, much more glorious than the first. The first coming was marked by patience; the second will bring the crown of a divine kingdom.

As a consequence of this, a traditional scheme of preaching for the four Sundays of advent has been on what are called the Four Last Things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. St Philip Neri said that "Beginners in religion ought to exercise themselves principally in meditation on the Four Last Things." We are all in some sense beginners in religion, so that's what I'm going to do this Advent.

First, let's talk vocabulary. Death, die, dying, are good and honest words which we don't need to skirt around or avoid. Passing away, passing on, slipping into the next room, are not helpful terms: they don't make it easier, and they don't make it more truthful.

Secondly, by death we really mean two separate but related things. The first is physical, bodily: the end of breath, of the circulation of the blood, of the fascinating and inscrutable activity of the brain. Spiritually speaking, death is the separation of the body and the soul from each other. This means not only the loss of physical activity, but also the loss of potential: there is no more doing to be done in this life.

This experience of death will be shared by almost everyone who ever lives: St Paul notes that it will be different for those who are alive at the time of the second coming, but since only God knows when that will be, we shouldn't let that concern us too much. One of the most important facts about the incarnation, the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us, is that he not only experienced being born and growing up, loving, being loved, grieving, hunger, temptation, pain: he also died. St Thomas More says we shouldn't think of death as a stranger, but rather as a near neighbour. St Francis of Assisi, taking a perhaps less English view of things, famously said "Praised are you, my Lord, for our sister bodily Death, from whom no living man can escape."

There are, moreover, plenty of Our Lord's parables and sayings where acknowledges the reality of death: the rich man and his storehouses; the other rich man and Lazarus;

> "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives;" "they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away."

So what should our attitude to death be? Some are terribly afraid of it for themselves, they chase youth and do all they can to hide from the signs of ageing. Here we might remember the words of the Book of Wisdom

> The righteous man, though he die early, will be at rest. For old age is not honoured for length of time, nor measured by number of years; but understanding is grey hair for men, and a blameless life is ripe old age.

Others aren't afraid of death for themselves but for those they love. That loss of potential which death is, is almost too much to bear. Still others seem not to care at all, they behave in risky ways towards themselves and others. If we are afraid of death, we can at least try to make it a productive fear: your loved ones won't be with you for ever, so love them as much as you can, now; you won't be here for ever, so love your God, your neighbour and yourself as much as you can, now.

Lastly, there are some practical matters about death which we should think about. If you ought to make a will, do it: don't leave a mess for those who come after. If you are thinking of leaving something to a charity, it can be helpful to let them (I nearly said us) know, as some methods or forms of wording can be useful to make sure they receive what you wish to give. If you have something to put right, do your part in that, remembering that no one can force another person to accept an apology or forgive them. And also that you can't make someone apologise to you. Better simply to pray for them.

If you are thinking of those you love who have died, remember to pray for them; remember too that, for the faithful, life is changed not ended, and when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling place is made ready for them in heaven. We should be thankful, where appropriate; prayerful, always; but not oppressed by the dead: they are where they are, and we are where we are, and we have plenty of living and loving to do until we see them again.

When someone you know is dying, call a priest earlier rather than later: hearing and participating in the rites at the end of life often brings great comfort and peace.

Lastly, be in a state of grace. Don't have mortal sins on your conscience which you haven't confessed. If you yourself aren't in a state of grace now, you should address that with great urgency. You never know when your time will come.

In the Imitation of Christ, we read

> Every action of yours, every thought, should be those of one who expects to die before the day is out. Death would have no great terrors for you if you had a quiet conscience .... Then why not keep clear of sin instead of running away from death? If you aren't fit to face death today, it's very unlikely you will be tomorrow.

On that cheerful note: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

II. Judgement

In 1085, William the Conqueror- who also goes by other less flattering nicknames- sent his agents to every shire in England, to list what he owned and what revenues were due to him. The result was what became known as the Domesday Book: doom here is an old English word which means judgement, and the idea was that the contents of the book were as unalterable as Domesday, the Last judgement, itself. Doom nowadays never means just judgement: it always has negative connotations, doom and gloom, we're all doomed, Captain Mainwaring, and we can see the crossover between doom as judgement and doom as a horrible end in the closing words of the old Scots death sentence, last used in 1963: "which is pronounced for doom." Both a legal judgement and an end which cannot be avoided.

Judgement is an uncomfortable topic: "judge not, lest ye be judged," says Our Lord. He also says "The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and when he does, he will reward each one according to his behaviour."

In the Church, we speak about two kinds of judgement: the particular, or individual, and the last judgement. The particular judgement is what happens when we die. The Last Judgement is at the end of the ages. We are who we fully and truly are as a unity of body and soul, and that means that death, when body and soul are separated from one another, puts an end to human life as the time open either to accepting or to rejecting the grace of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. Did we say yes to God, or no? This is a choice which God has given us to make, and I think one of the most important meanings of "judge not lest you be judged" is that we cannot know or presume what another person's relationship with God is like. We can only know for ourselves. Sometimes that knowledge is unclear, uncertain, but if we are trying our best in good faith to take up our cross each day and follow Christ, that is doing what we're asked to. Our consciences, the "aboriginal vicar of Christ," as Newman calls it, will tell us if we are lying to ourselves and to God. And those consciences can be trained, stretched, informed, formed: living the life of the church, listening to the teachings of the church, making use of the sacraments of the church, is how we know that we're doing what we're asked to do. That's the point of being in communion with the Church and with one another. It means, not trying to do things by ourselves, not pretending we can keep things to ourselves.

The catechism puts things very straightforwardly in this way:

> Following in the steps of the prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the judgement of the Last Day in his preaching. Then will the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts be brought to light. Then will the culpable unbelief that counted the offer of God's grace as nothing be condemned. Our attitude to our neighbour will disclose acceptance or refusal of grace and divine love. On the Last Day Jesus will say: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Two things to pick out here: "Culpable unbelief" is when we knew what was right and didn't do it, and when we knew what was wrong and did it anyway. Outside here, in polite society, everyone knows the Catholic Church is full of woman-haters and perverts. I know this because people tell me. Sometimes it's easier for people not to challenge this preconceived image, to say "I wouldn't be welcome" rather than to change their

lives. Other times, the face of the Church which people have been shown is a hateful face, an abusive face, is not the face of Christ. Not "culpable unbelief." Doing this "to the least of these my brethren" isn't only the works of mercy, it's also when those people are abused and reviled and hurt and disregarded because they are the least, because they have no advocate, no social value. On this too we shall be judged.

The consequence of the judgement is really just a continuation of the direction of travel we have chosen to be on in this life. Towards God: heaven, most likely via purgatory to cleanse us of those faults which cannot be in the presence of God who is beauty, truth, and goodness. Away from God: hell, eternal separation from him, freely chosen by us despite all the love of God. God wants everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, says St Paul, but God doesn't force anyone to choose him. It should be much easier to choose him if we are part of Christ's mystical body, the Church. This is why we evangelise, preach the gospel by our words and by our lives. But it's certainly possible to be a member on the outside, and barricade the entrance to our hearts internally.

Here is a non-controversial example of not choosing God. Whatever stage of your life you become a Catholic at, you know that if you sin and fall short of loving God, your neighbour, and yourself, you can and should go to confession to get back to the relationship with God you ought to be in. But people don't. They know, they could, they can, they don't. That's what not choosing God looks like. They let things like embarrassment or laziness or presumption (there's always tomorrow) get in the way. This gardens, calcifies, like the inside of your kettle. They choose those things over God. We all do sometimes. But we don't have forever to put things right. We have until we die, and that's it.

That's the Particular judgement. By the Last Judgement, we mean what we say in the Creed, that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. One of our famous English language wedding services calls it "the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed." The text called the Creed of St Athanasius says, "At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire."

The thing about judgement is that God knows, you know; and you know that God knows, and God knows that you know; and one day everyone will know. There will be no more secrecy, no more shabby self-deception and concealment. There are 17 days until Christmas. It cannot be avoided. There may be more or fewer than 17 days until you are judged. That can't be avoided either.

III. Heaven

Heaven, as George Orwell noted, is almost impossible to talk about as "a condition in which the ordinary human being actively want[s] to be." Whatever tradition or faith one comes out of, it's hard "to describe any next-world activity which a thinking person would find endurable, let alone attractive." I would tend to agree, although I'm going to give it my best shot. Let's go back to first principles. From the Penny Catechism: "Why did God make you? God made me to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this world, and be happy with Him forever in the next."

"To be happy with him." Part of the problem with heaven lies in our idea of what happiness is: more stuff, less effort? Clean streets, clean sheets, someone else to do all the work? In the wealthy west, we might find that other people's ideas of happiness, and therefore of heaven, are not a million miles from the lives we actually lead (which is why, of course, people want to come here – you would, I would, if I were in their shoes, if they even have shoes). And we know very well all the downsides of our lives. So, if in what millions of people imagine as heaven on earth we find things to be dissatisfied with, what hope does actual heaven have?

If we look at sacred scripture, we might be surprised to find that descriptions of heaven are not really about feeling at all, whether that's bodily comfort or emotional satisfaction. It's true that all the things in this life which give us pleasure and other good feelings are anticipations of the blessedness of heaven, and when we think of things that appear to give us pleasure but also wear off quickly, or bring regret in their wake, we can more easily see how, in general, evil is something good used wrongly. Here's St Paul: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." And Our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And St John: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

We are better off, then, thinking of heaven as heaven is now, for most of those who are there (hold that thought), before the last judgement, as a condition rather than a place. The technical term for this condition is the Beatific Vision. Heaven is seeing, and being seen; knowing, and being known; understanding, and being understood. (I said "for most of those who are in heaven." Remember that, in the separation of body and soul which is what death is, there is imperfection because we aren't truly who we fully are, as a unity of body and soul. The dead have not yet "taken up their bodies again" as we shall do at the last judgement, at the resurrection of the dead, so that we can truly live the life of the world to come. This is why the insistence of the dogma of the Assumption, that Our Lady is assumed body and soul into heavenly glory, is so important: she's completely her in heaven, as is Our Lord because he was taken up in his body at the ascension. These are promises to us of what will be.)

Heaven is seeing, and being seen; knowing, and being known; understanding, and being understood. Since our First Parents, human beings have been somewhat uncomfortable with this whole concept. It's why they hid, why they invented clothes, why we have curtains. There are things we think people ought not to see, things we don't went people to see. But heaven is not, cannot be like that. This is why if you hear people say fatuous things like "I'd rather be in hell because all the interesting people will be there", you should treat it as the offensive and blasphemous nonsense that it is.

Heaven is seeing, knowing, understanding; being seen, being known, being understood. Another word for this might be being free: The closer we come to God, the less we are inclined to sin, for we begin to share in the freedom of God Himself. To be in heaven is, ultimately, to be completely free; to be fulfilled, to be completely who we're supposed to be.

IV. Hell

What is hell? There may be various answers so let's take some of them:

It has a road to it paved with good intentions. It is, says Sartre, other people. It's where, according to Reverend Lovejoy, they eat naught but burning hot coals and drink naught but burning hot cola.

Or, hell is something the Church doesn't believe in anymore, and hasn't since some unspecified point in the middle of the last century.

Looking at articles in that journal of record, the Oxford Mail, we learn that what people describe as "Hell" (living hell, going through hell, you get the picture) includes: acting in a Swedish horror film; living near roadworks (that comes up a lot); various city and county council decisions re transport; and sharing a road with Mr Jeremy Clarkson. In fact if we got rid of roads we might be living as near to heaven on earth as possible.

On what the Church says today, here is the second Vatican council speaking in Lumen Gentium, the Constitution on the Church:

"Since we know neither the day nor the hour, we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that, when the single course of our earthly life is completed, we may merit to enter with him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where "men will weep and gnash their teeth."

Now, fire, outer darkness, gnashing of teeth is more like it. We are almost duty bound to remember here the story of the congregation to whom these words were preached, and the old lady who said, I haven't got any teeth, and the preacher who responded "teeth will be provided."

George Orwell, whom I invoked last week, said that while heaven is impossible to describe convincingly, "Many a revivalist minister, many a Jesuit priest (see, for instance, the terrific sermon in James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist) has frightened his congregation almost out of their skins with his word-pictures of Hell." I have no wish to frighten anyone. I would like instead to make you very sad at the prospect of hell.

Because, you see, hell is a free choice. As the Catechism says, "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end." Remember how important our human freedom is, and also how there are many things which can affect it, can make us less free. Medical things, our upbringing, our experiences, can mean that as St Paul says, we do the things we don't want to do, and don't do the things we do want. We might think of parents who are not good at loving their children because they weren't loved themselves. We might also think of parents who have overcome or transcended such traumas: while we can be thankful for them, it's far from clear to me at least how much we can blame the ones who don't do better because they don't know better.

To go back to the Catechism:

"The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal

fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs."

The free choice which leads to eternal separation from God is the choice in life for separation from God. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. What we do to and for the least of our brethren we do to him, both acts of charity, love, service, and when we freely choose acts of coldness, hatred, neglect. It's the good we choose not to do, and the evil we choose to do.

In fact we are only trapped in this selfishness, this self centredness, to the extent that we freely choose to be. Sometimes we're like that because of other factors, but the free choice to wrap ourselves in so many chains of our own making, is what damns us. "I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

This is the pivot into the Christmassy bit of the sermon, by the way. The coming of Our Saviour which we are preparing to commemorate is the certain way out of this, if we choose to take it. Jesus who saves us form our sins, Emmanuel, God with us, invites us to take up our cross and follow him, to come to him heavily laden as we are and find our rest. We want to make our own the prayer of the Mass, "order our days in your peace, and command that we be delivered from eternal damnation and counted among the flock of those you have chosen." We need the grace and the courage to recognise what we can't do by ourselves, and that with God nothing will be impossible. What matters is that whatever the brokenness, despair, wounds we have, Jesus is the answer, and that all of us in this Church who once dwelt in darkness now live in light, and that everyone should come to know, through us as far as possible, the love of God in Christ who was born, lived, was crucified and rose again for them, for us, for you, for me. This, if you are looking for it, is the meaning of Christmas. And that was the last of the Four Last Things.