

Gospel text

John 6: 37-40

37 All those whom the Father entrusts to me will cling to me, and I will not put them off. 38 For I have come out of God's world, not to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me. 39 This is the will of him who sent me, that I should see to it that none of those whom he has entrusted to me should perish, but that I should revive them at the end of time. 40 For it is my Father's will that all those who meet me and believe in me should receive eternal life, and I will give them life again at the end of time.

Gospel commentary - Homily

What is death?

Catholic liturgy has placed this short passage from John in the context of the commemoration of the "faithful departed". So let's talk about death. Our relationship with death is complex. One of my aunts tragically lost her husband in a car accident, leaving her alone with her seven children. She never really got over it, becoming bitter, cursing God for taking away the man she loved. The experience of death can be cruel, but it can also be ironically joyful. Few people probably regretted the accidental death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner group. And each of us has our own list of people for whom we rejoice that death exists and that one day they will all disappear, ceasing in our opinion to poison this earth. And then there are all those people who wish death would come soon, either because they're tired and old, and complain that "God has forgotten them", or because they're experiencing excruciating, unbearable suffering, and seek medical assistance in dying (what some call: assisted suicide): in the latter case, death becomes a blessing, and the moment of death is the occasion for a peaceful, joyous celebration⁴. The fact remains that death is part of the mystery of life, of which it is one facet. And let's not think that the Gospels make the mystery disappear. At the very most, they shed light on its meaning. This is what John's passage in today's Gospel offers us.

This short extract from John is part of Jesus' great discourse on the bread of life. After feeding a crowd, Jesus reproaches the Jews for being content with perishable food, rather than seeking that which abides in eternal life. When the Jews ask him what they should do, Jesus simply replies: believe that he is the bread of life from God. How are we to understand the expression "bread of life"? The answer comes from the Old Testament, first from the prophet Amos ("oracle of the Lord my God - where I will spread famine in the land, not hunger for bread, nor thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord" 8:11-12), then from the book of Proverbs, which speaks of Wisdom's invitations ("Go, eat of my bread, drink of the wine I have mixed" 9:5), and again from Sirach, which speaks of what Wisdom does for the God-fearing ("she will feed him with the bread of understanding, she will give him drink of the water of wisdom" 15:3). So, for the evangelist John, the bread of life is the wisdom brought by Jesus through his teaching, his actions and the orientation of his whole life. All this is a source of eternal life. So, just as the word bread can have many meanings, so the word life can have many meanings. Indeed, life is not only physical life, but also moral and spiritual life: there are people who are physically healthy, but their heart is dead, without love, or their inner being is without motivation, all disoriented. Yet the evangelist affirms that accepting and living Jesus' teaching enables someone to have a moral and spiritual life so full that it will last forever.

Our passage is now addressed to believers who have accepted this statement of Jesus. Why is this statement accessible only through faith? Just as someone who has only known his own piece of land surrounded by mountains can only accept that the earth is round by trusting in the affirmation of those who know it is round, so it is with our acceptance that the essence of life is to love humbly, to care for others, in short, to take the same path as Jesus, even in suffering and death. This orientation to life is so counter-intuitive that only a movement of God in one's heart makes it all credible. I remember the Frenchman who once boasted about his Rolex watch and said, "Isn't that a measure of success?" How can such a person understand the direction proposed by Jesus? That's why Jesus speaks of those whom the Father gives him, i.e. that mysterious impulse of love deep in his heart that makes it possible to feel a connivance with what Jesus did and said.

Why does the evangelist insist so much on Jesus doing his Father's will? It's his way of saying that to see Jesus is to see the mysterious God we cannot see: Jesus is the mirror of God. And as God is the one who created life, who gives it all its meaning, so Jesus' life and his word define the meaning of life, paving the way for us in turn to find the meaning of our lives. In other words, the sayings and life of Jesus bear the guarantee of God himself, the author of life.

Why is this Gospel of John proposed for the commemoration of the faithful departed? You can't talk about life without talking about death, and you can't talk about death without talking about life. And just as life can have many meanings, so death can have many meanings. There is an inextricable link between the two. The evangelist concludes this short passage by saying: God's will is that the believer should have eternal life, and Jesus will raise him up on the last day. So, even in this world, we are plotting our eternal destiny, because we are constantly making choices, giving our lives direction. Right from this world, we choose paths of life or paths of death. For example, is Vladimir Putin's path of absolute power and control a path of life or death? At any given moment, we can be called upon to love, to be compassionate, to forgive, to open up to what is different, to care for others - all gestures that are part of the path of life. And yet, the evangelist says this: all those who take such a path of life will, of course, experience physical death like everyone else, but this physical death will only be a transition, or rather a new birth to an even fuller life. For love cannot die, true life calls for an even greater supplement of life, and to achieve this, we must accept to abandon the physical limits of this earthly life.

In the past, the Catholic Church offered a simple recipe: "We are the true Church, and the only way to be saved is to be baptized and observe the Church's commandments." No such guarantee exists today. And eternity begins now, because it is now that we "tear ourselves away" from death, from everything that is a refusal to love, from everything that is not a life of great human quality.

At the beginning of this commentary, we talked about our complex relationship with physical death. When you've loved someone, mourning hurts, but there's all the difference in the world between mourning in faith and without faith, just as there's a difference between what someone experiences who sees "their grown up boy" or "their grown up girl" leave home to study at a university abroad, and the person in a couple who experiences rejection and the wreckage of a life together; in the first case, the separation opens up to a future relationship at a higher level, in the second case the separation is hopeless. Some people regard death as a scandal. Yet it is legitimate to consider physical death as a value, and for certain specific reasons. In some cases, it is only at this point that a source of evil or terror comes to an end: dictators or tyrants spring to mind. In other cases, it will be the desire for a better quality of life in the face of moribund living or extreme suffering that calls for the end of physical life; no one can pass judgment on all these cases.

In short, our daily lives are a constant challenge, because choosing life and snatching death away are two facets of the same effort. But our consolation is in knowing that every little victory, every bit of life that settles into our existence is destined to remain forever, beyond physical death. That's why we take the time to underline this with this feast of the "faithful departed", which should more properly be translated as "the living departed".

¹ See the case of Yves Belair in [La Presse](#) (Montreal, Canada) by Patrick Lagacé, May 28th 2023. For the full text (French): [Bon voyage, Yves](#) ▲

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, September 2023