

All Saints' Day

DEATH SWALLOWED UP FOREVER

Isaiah 25:6-9

All Saints' Day

Analysis by Paul Jaster

*6On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained
clear.*

*7And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
8he will swallow up death forever.*

*Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the
earth,
for the LORD has spoken.*

*9It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might
save us.*

*This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

DIAGNOSIS: Grave Indigestion (“Oh, Mon Dieu”)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : A Sad Shroud Cast Over All Peoples

On All Saints' Day, many worshiping assemblies recall by name

those who have entered the ranks of the “departed faithful.” This day is a sobering reminder that the problem of our sin is not just a matter of our morality but our mortality. All people die. A “shroud” is cast over all people. It does not matter if we have been good or bad—saintly or sinnerly. It does not matter if we are rich or poor, living in a mansion in America or a hovel in Haiti. The math on the actuarial tables is ruthlessly equal and consistent. The probability that we will die is 100%. And it’s one death per person. No more. No less. And when that happens to one who is near and dear to us, it hurts and leaves us with an empty lump in our throat. Even months or years after a death has taken place, our eyes get misty and our throats get choked up as the “departed faithful” are recalled on All Saints’ Sunday.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Ashamed, Disgraced*

But, gulp! There’s more. For the prophet Isaiah, there’s much more to death than sadness. There is culpability, guilt, and shame—before God no less. Death is not the natural and final stage of life, the way some soothing but secular thanatologists like to put it. Death is God’s judgment on our sin; Isaiah constantly warned those who were all too smug in their worship at Mount Zion. If we will not glory in God’s grace by depending on it wholly and solely, then we will be dis-graced. And being dis-graced by God leads to an unrelieved death of a grievous kind. And even the most faithful among us have our moments of weakness and our lack of faith. (Or, as one pastor use to smirk whenever anyone lauded him as being saintly: “The reputation of a saint depends upon the silence of one’s family.”) Witness the scandal created when it was disclosed that Mother Theresa had her doubts, her questions and disbeliefs. She had her feet of clay, too. We all do. And, Isaiah insists (in his first 39 chapters), God holds us accountable for that. But we don’t want

to hear it. It's too tough to swallow.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Swallowed Up by Death*

Isaiah's word for death is "mot." Israel's ancient neighbors personified that very same word as "Mot," the god of death. Mot was the son of El, the chief god. Often he was pictured simply as a mouth with a ravenous appetite that gulped down every living creature in his path. By the time that Isaiah's words were written down, it must have seemed that "Mot" already had quite a feast at their expense and they were only biding time until death would swallow them up too. And worst of all, YHWH, the God of Israel let it happen. It was God's judgment on their sin. And that is the wretched sadness that washes over us every time we stand before another grave. Death ultimately has a way of swallowing up everything we hold dear, sucking out life, and spitting out the bones. Death is the ultimate enemy of humanity. And God allows it all to happen. And so, there is clearly a connection between the pit of death that swallows up the ones we love and the pit in our stomachs and the emptiness our gut feels before God. It can take our appetite for life away. Or, as Mrs. Job said to her husband, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

PROGNOSIS: A Healthy Hearty Appetite (Eucharistic "Bon Appetit")

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Death Swallowed by the Death, Resurrection and Exaltation of Christ*

However, Isaiah predicts that the day is coming when God will turn the tables on ravenous Mot and swallow up death forever. Oddly though, this did not happen on Mount Zion as Isaiah anticipated but rather through the cross of Christ planted on Mount Calvary. A very different Son of God, Jesus Christ, (with a very different appetite, one for saving sinners) crawls into our skin and mortal human situation. He befriends sinners and

dies a very real death “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:8). He obediently follows the will of God and dies on our behalf. He takes on his plate, not just our death, but also the culpable judgment behind it. And because of that gracious and obedient gesture of his beloved Son, God turns the tables on death, raises Jesus from the dead, crowns him with glory and honor, and in the process turns death itself into the main entree and swallows up death forever.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Tears Gracefully Wiped Away

Death still happens. But, by God’s gracious act in Jesus Christ, it is no longer the “last thing” that will happen. The sting of sin and the grave end of life under God’s law is taken away for those “who are trusting in Christ Jesus,” which is the Christian Gospel’s ultimate definition of a “saint.” The “saints” are those who hear and believe the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism (we heard earlier this year on Pentecost 6 from Ephesians 1:1-13). And there comes a time when the perishable body of the “saints” will put on immortality, and then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54). This is the certain hope that wipes away our tears and calms our fears.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A Grand Mountain-Top Feast

For Christian people, the grand mountain-top feast which Isaiah foretells has already begun. The main course of rich food and well-aged wines (when death is swallowed up forever) is still waiting to be served in God’s good time. But, the appetizers (the foretaste) of Christ’s own body and blood in bread and wine are already on the table for those who gather around the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is our time to sing the new song: “Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him, so that he

might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." This eating and drinking fills our hearts with joy and gives us the fortitude and stomach to be Christ's body in the world. For in the end, saintly faith is not so much a discipline or commitment to a certain morality as it is a desperate hunger for the gracious salvation that Christ brings. So dig in. Eat and drink. Be glad and rejoice. Or, as the French say, "Bon Appetit."