

Sermon

September 20, 2012

[Death has had a good run lately. The twentieth century was Death's century, and it is hard to feel good about the twenty-first century; it may belong to Death too.

How should we think about Death? Is it an evil? –I have been pondering these topics, largely to no avail. But then I stumbled upon this Sermon folded up and tucked away in an old book. The Sermon was delivered by an unnamed preacher to a body of believers known as the Symparanekromenoi. As best I have been able to ferret out (they were a secret and secretive body, and there is little record of them or their activities), they were worshippers of death, glad of it, and sworn to its service—at least in a liturgical way. They met on Saturday evenings and joined together in prayer and banqueting, looking ahead to their own end. I am going to share the Sermon with you—although I warn you that I do not quite know what to make of it. I offer it to you as a document of our time. I am unsure what it means exactly, but I am sure that it must mean something.

What to say? No one can deny that death is the end of life. And by end, I mean 'telos' or something much like that. Perhaps death is the apotheosis of life. That seems wrong, but is it? The open grave waits for each of us with its arms flung wide, ready to receive us into its chill embrace. Shall we fall into those arms, returning the embrace, welcoming our end, installing ourselves where moth and rust do corrupt, but where there are no more tears and no more sorrow? Shall we set aside hope in favor of resignation, and resignation in favor of surrender, the surrender of the beloved to the lover, and not the surrender of the loser to the winner? Perhaps the grave is the victor, but maybe death has no sting to offer, rather only a honeyed nothingness into which we can sink and disappear?

I do not know the answers to these questions. Maybe the preacher did. Here are his words.]

Fellow corpses-to-be, Brothers and Sisters,

I am going to die.

You are going to die.

(Can I get an "Amen!"?)

This is the Good News, this our Gospel! We will joyfully shuffle, dance off this mortal coil, recoil from our humanity and embrace finality.

I am going to die.

You are going to die.

Amen!

Let us recall our Shakespeare's (revised) words:

...To die, and go we know nowhere,
to lie in cold obstruction and to rot,
This sensible warme motion, to become
a kneaded clod...

These are our words, brother and sisters: to lie in cold obstruction and to rot! May it soon be so, for each of us. Such wonders! In the twinkling of an eye the twinkle in my eye will be put out. Snuffed. My eyes will go dark and I will be no more. I will be extinguished, extinct. Tracelessly gone. Marvelously changed—I will cool, grow still, grow stiff, begin to stink. I will decay. I will be no more, no more, no more and never more, ages upon ages and worlds to come. And it is not just me: this Strangling Fountain is open to all.

You too will lie in cold obstruction and rot. What blessings! We are earthy, headed for death, deathbound mud. We will be buried and will not rise again. 'Resurrection', that dirty word, is a word that would lift us up out of our paradisaical dirt. But we will not rise. We lie down to stay down, to sleep forevermore. But—thanks be to our darkling God—it will not be sleep, not even a deep dreamless sleep. No, no sleep: nothingness. Absence. Emptiness. This is our kenosis: a self-emptying so complete that even the container, the self, is discarded, destroyed.

We are baptized into the earth, dust to dust. For us, what matters is that the tomb is full, not empty. And not just anyone's tomb, but my tomb and your tomb, our tombs. They will be full, kingdom come, world without end.

We will, all of us, one day meet our Unmaker. We will cease to be. Nothingness will overshadow us and we will give birth to our cessation. If this is not so, we are of all people most miserable.

Soon we will sing our hymn, "Our Hope is Built on Nothingness", but before we do, let me invite those of you who still wrestle with death, with dying, who believe that death is something wrong, to lay down your doubts, forget your resistance, and take up your caskets and follow us, the Symparanekromenoi, the fellowship of the living buried! For it is only in the darkness of death that light, and true

life, can be found. Come, Unmaker, come. Death is devoutly to be wished for.