

The Muzzling of Death's All Consuming Jaws

Homily for May 12, 2019

A fourth century author, known as St. Ephrem the Deacon wrote a remarkable Easter Season homily in which he speaks about death's defeat by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Let's listen to this fourth century Christian:

At length death came upon Eve, the mother of all the living. She was that vineyard whose enclosure her own hands had enabled death to violate, so that she could taste its fruit; thus the mother of all the living became the source of death for every living creature.

There is a play on words here. Eve, whose name means "mother of all the living" becomes the mother of all the dying. Eve is envisioned as a vineyard that is enclosed and protected from death. But by her own choice, (*her own hands had enabled death to violate*) in which Adam was complicit, the ripening grapes of grace were ruined by death's bitter fruit. Hers and Adam's choice opened the vineyard to death's wasting disease.

Deacon Ephrem then contrasts this couple with another.

But in her stead Mary grew up, a new vine in place of the old. Christ, the new life, dwelt within her.

Continuing the imagery, St Ephrem characterizes Mary as this new vine and within her life the one who is Life Himself, Jesus Christ. He then writes of death's attempt to destroy the New Eve and New Adam.

When death, with its customary impudence, came foraging for her mortal fruit, it encountered its own destruction in the hidden life that fruit contained. All unsuspecting, it swallowed him up, and in so doing released life itself and set free a multitude of men.

Here St Ephrem is describing the effects of the Cross and Resurrection, that force greater than death was able to therefore destroy this mortal enemy, thereby freeing a multitude of people. The multitude envisioned by St. John in today's Revelation Reading:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,¹

These are those who have been freed from the dominion of death. We know this because a few verses later St John is told who they are:

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Re 7:9). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal²

The Great ordeal is the earthly combat described by St. Ephrem where death is always trying to break through and defeat us. Although death's persistence is relentless, St Ephrem boldly declares death cannot win!

He who was also the carpenter's glorious son set up his cross above death's all-consuming jaws, and led the human race into the dwelling place of life. Since a tree had brought about the downfall of mankind, it was upon a tree that mankind crossed over to the realm of life. Bitter was the branch that had once been grafted upon that ancient tree, but sweet the young shoot that has now been grafted in, the shoot in which we are meant to recognize the Lord whom no creature can resist.

I think this beautiful writing.

- *the carpenter's glorious son set up his cross above death's all-consuming jaws*
- *it was upon a tree that mankind crossed over to the realm of life.*
- *Bitter was the branch that had once been grafted upon that ancient tree, but sweet the young shoot that has now been grafted in*

Isn't that great? That sweet young shoot has grown into the Tree of Life that in turn gives life to all who eat its fruit,

As I was reading this passage from St Ephrem I made a connection with the encouragement stated by Paul and Barnabas when in Antioch. St Luke tell us:

When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.³

The grace of God is the life of Jesus that defeats the disgrace of death. Ultimately that disgrace means death and separation from God. But it is also the disgrace of death that cuts people off from God in this life. To continue in the grace of God means that we are like, St. Ephrem's sweet young shoots grafted onto the Tree of Life. What is the Tree of Life? It is the life emanating from the Tree of the Cross as we are then fed life's medicine – the antidote to death's poison, the very body and blood of him who died on that Calvary's Tree. The blood referred to in our Revelation

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Re 7:14). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ac 13:43). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

reading. After being told that the multitude are those who have come out of the great ordeal we then read:

they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

What do these white robes represent? Here we are in Revelation chapter 7. In chapter 19:8 we are given the answer:

***to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.***⁴

Do you see the connection? Our deeds are purified by the blood of the Lamb, the Eucharistic Lord so that while we still live in the present, we experience the great ordeal, we know that because of Jesus' Victory we will also be ultimately victorious. Returning to Revelation 7 we see the victorious state of the white clad saint:

***For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***⁵

Remember what St. Ephrem said:

- *the carpenter's glorious son set up his cross above death's all-consuming jaws*

Here is declared the liberty of those set free from death's consuming jaws. No hunger or scorching heart, springs of life giving water where every tear, resulting from death's influence and dominion, will be wiped away.

And there at the centre of the throne is the Lamb who is also the shepherd. The one who is Jesus and in today's Gospel tells us what it means for us to be his sheep. These are words of wonderful assurance and promise:

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Re 19:8). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Re 7:15–17). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.⁶

To be those who in this present life want our deeds to represent our choice to grow in holiness because we know death will not win, means that we love to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. The Shepherd who speaks to us through our conscience, those who loves us, through the Deposit of Faith, which is the Scriptures and Great Tradition of the Church, through our priests, so that we can in turn follow Jesus. And what is the food the shepherd gives us? Eternal life, which in John 6 Jesus says is the Eucharist:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.⁷

The Good shepherd who we trust in by faith we will one day see as we will be raised up and join those who have come out of the great ordeal and our deeds infused the grace of the Eucharist will allow us to one day say:

Amen, Death's Jaws have been muzzled, the Great Ordeal is Over and the Victory of the Cross is fully realized!

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Jn 10:27–28). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Jn 6:54–55). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.