

### **33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

We find ourselves already at the second-to-last Sunday of the liturgical year. Where has the year gone? How can it be so close to the end already? Yet these feelings are very appropriate for the Mass we celebrate this Sunday, whose readings encourage us to count time carefully, to be aware of its passage, to meditate on our mortality and the passing of all things, and to think soberly of the end and the final judgment.

The Church gives us the entire month of November to contemplate the Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. We still have about 2 weeks left, and we should resist letting Advent and Christmas “creep forward” in our thoughts and spirituality, causing us to miss the graces that are meant for us in November.

Our reading from Daniel, with its vision of Michael, great distress, those who are asleep awakening, and the splendor of the righteous, is perhaps the clearest description of the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life in the Old Testament. This prophetic oracle of Daniel was originally intended to offer hope to the people of Israel who were suffering great persecution from foreign powers, and it has continued to offer hope to Christians through many times of persecution down through the centuries.

In today’s culture, many may take offense at the idea that there will be punishment for wickedness in the life to come. As Daniel says, “others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace,” a reference to what we would now call hell.

We need to remember that hell is a self-chosen state. Heaven is a kingdom of truth, of love, and of humility. But love is self-giving, not selfish. And truth can hurt, because it exposes our wrongdoing. And not everyone has the humility to admit the truth. Sadly, there will be those at the end of time who will choose not to exercise the humility to admit the truth and enter the kingdom of self-giving. Heaven would be a painful place for them, because they did not conform themselves to heaven in this life, so they will choose to exclude themselves from the presence of God and the saints. Your dispositions in this life, what you choose in this life, don’t change when you die - they continue, and you will choose an eternity that fits what you chose here.

The section of the *Catechism* on hell (1033-1037) would be an edifying reading this week. Here is the opening paragraph:

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor, or against ourselves: “He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:14-15). Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell.” (¶1033)

In talking of death, judgment, heaven, and hell, we should not reduce hell to God punishing you because you didn’t do what he wanted - hopefully the paragraph from the catechism underlined that.

Rather, it’s something like this:

You are here in Lewiston and seeking to get to the Oregon coast. Someone hands you a map and all the directions you could ever need to get there - the biggest one being you have to go west, correct? But you can choose to ignore that and drive north and never go west, can’t you? But that’s not the Oregon coast; that’s Canada. You’ll never get to where your goal is - the west coast - but you can absolutely choose to go a different direction than that goal.

Translating that to God and this life:

God has come in the flesh, walked among us, told us, and gratuitously given to us, via his commandments and instructions, all the directions that we need to be with him, to reach heaven and spend eternity with our Creator. But we can choose to go in different directions. Heaven and hell aren’t reward and punishment from an angry God, i.e. “do what I want or else”; they are God telling us, at the end of our lives, where we chose to drive to. It would be silly to, if you drove to Canada when you wanted to get to the Oregon coast, to then be upset when someone told you that you were in Canada. Judgment at the end of your life is God telling you where you freely chose to drive to.

Lastly, I'd like to link us to our Christian ancestors, who thought on these same realities in their lives, and wrote to spur themselves and us onward in the work toward eternal life.

From Cynwulf, a ninth century Anglo-Saxon Christian poet:

Therefore whoever desires to have life with the Creator should bestir himself while body and spirit are joined together. Let him zealously foster the beauty of his soul according to God's will, and be careful in word and deed, in thought and conduct, while this world, speeding with its shadows, may still shine on him; so that he lose not in this fleeting time the blessedness of his joy and the fullness of his days, the beauty of his work and the reward of glory, which the righteous King of heaven shall give at that holy tide as a share of victory to those who in spirit obey him with gladness.