

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 5:21-43

*In the very midst of life snares of death surround us, we sang earlier. Who shall help us in the strife, lest the foe confound us? Well, I suppose the answer will come as a surprise to no one, rather, it would seem almost a given, given where we are, and out of what kind of hymnal it is that we sing it: *Thou only, Lord; Thou only.**

In real life, though, there are no easy answers when it comes to death; in fact, nothing is easy. It seems, in fact, that this is exactly what the hymn acknowledges and expresses, when it not only gives the almost obvious answer, that which seems so much like a given, but emphasises and intensifies it by repeating it: *Thou only, Lord; Thou only;* that this Truth is *not* a given, not an obvious and easy answer, but rather a profound and precious one: that in God is not only relief in distress, but real rescue, even in death.

It would also seem that the hymn expresses already at the outset that the answer is not an obvious or easy one, as it asks: *Who shall help us in the strife, lest the foe confound us?* Surrounded by the snares of death as we are in the very midst of life, neither living nor dealing with death are easy matters; there is real strife in both.

Nor is it an easy thing to keep our minds clear; we are easily *confounded*, confused by the devil, and by his allies, the world and our own sinful nature.

It is but natural for us to despair at death, our own death, when impending, and the death of those we love. If we do not sense it we assume it, do we not, the desperation in the plea of the father as we hear it today: *My little daughter lies at the point of death.* Even if we also see the expression of faith in the very fact that he turns to our Lord Jesus with his plea: *Come and lay Your hands upon her, that she may be healed, and she will live.* And is that not how doubt and despair always live alongside the faith in the hearts and minds of the faithful, particularly in the face of the most devastating, like the death of a child?

Most often we react differently to the death of an old person, do we not, or someone who has been sick for a long time, than we do when death strikes in the very midst of life. Although we do grieve for those near and dear to us who die after a long life, or after a long struggle with sickness and suffering, our grief in those situations is usually one of resigned melancholy rather than of despair and disbelief.

Even then, though, grief is difficult enough to bear. So easily the devil and the world and sinful nature will make us to seek relief from our grief in *denial*. Death is a part of life, the world teaches us, making it seem as if it were even actually a good thing, although no one can really explain to us how, not in any meaningful way. We should *celebrate life*, it is said, rather than acknowledge death for the evil that it is. With such lies the devil and the world and our sinful nature confound and confuse us and keep us from turning to Him who alone has any really help to offer in the strife.

God hates death; because death is evil. And because God is a God of life. *He is not God of the dead, but rather of the living*, as our Lord Jesus has said it. Death is destruction of that which God made for life. It is a consequence of sin. And sin is itself the beginning of death, of separation from the life of God. *The day you eat of it you will surely die!*, God said of the tree by which we came to know evil, disobedience and defiance and doubt.

We hear today of how our Lord Jesus brought a little girl back to life from death. We hear also of how He healed a woman who had had a flow of blood for exactly as many years as the little girl had lived, and gave her her life back and set her free to live again.

In the very midst of life snares of death surround us. At any time, in so many ways, death might fall upon us, unexpectedly, in the very midst of life, when we are the most alive, or should be. And all through life we live in the shadow of death; in fact, long before we die, death has begun in us already.

The fate of the woman teaches us this. Not only had she suffered much from her sickness, and from many physicians; she suffered separation from God. Her particular ailment made her *unclean* according to the Law. For God hates death, and loss of blood is the beginning of death, of loss of life. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood*, as He says it, in the Law. And as such, under the Law of God, a flow of blood was judged *unclean*, as were many similar things; not because those exposed to or affected by such things were worse sinners than everybody else, but rather as a sign that death itself is under the judgement of God, and anything that is of death, and as a sign that our entire existence in sin is under the judgement and damnation of God. *It is appointed for Man once to die*, as the Letter to the Hebrews says it, *and then follows judgement*. And the judgement that follows is the *fullness* of death, an eternal and unending reality of suffering the judgement of God, His holy hatred of evil.

The goodness of God demands it, and all righteousness and right; so great an evil is sin that nothing less can make right the wrong that it is, any sin, all unbelief and impurity and ungodliness in our lives, and in our hearts and minds.

This is reality as it really is. *In the very midst of life snares of death surround us, says the hymn. Who shall help us in the strife, lest the foe confound us? Thou only, Lord; Thou only.* And the hymn says so, because God Himself says so, that is: because Holy Scripture teaches it. This is reality as it really is. All through our life we are under the judgement of death; in fact, we are already dead to God, because we make Him dead to us by our disobedience and defiance. All the sufferings and sorrows we encounter in life are but harbingers of death, reminders that life is not right, it is not what it should be, because we are not what we should be, we are not right with God, because our hearts are not right before Him; as such, they are constant reminders, also, that death is coming, and then judgement; unless, of course, our Lord Jesus will come again in glory before I die, with judgement, to judge both the living and the dead.

This is what is real, and there is no denying it; most certainly there is no escape, neither from death, nor from the reality of our sin, in denying either. Any escape we might find in denial of death, or denial of the evil of death, or the denial of sin, or of the evil of sin, it is but a false escape, and an evil one, being that it is a lie, and as such it is evil, as any lie is contrary to *His* nature, who is good, and Truth.

The cruelty of such denial, of the attempt to make evil seem good, will be evident in the face of *real* suffering; as the cruelty of shallow sayings such as that *God will never give you more than you can bear* will be clear to anyone who mourns the most devastating, like the death of a child, or that *every cloud has a silver lining*, implying that the death of your child is a good thing if only it makes you to be a better person.

There is nothing good about death; except when He who is good, and God, takes death in His own hands. And He has, and has done more than that: He has taken death upon Himself. And that is the only real comfort in the face of death, and it is more than comfort: it is real and actual *deliverance* from death.

The Son of God, who is God Himself from eternity, came to us from His fullness of life to go for us into the deepest depths of death. He who was from eternity the Father's Beloved came to us to have Himself cast out from the Father's love, out into the cold and darkness outside, all for us, for love of us, for our salvation.

He had Himself born into our kind, and baptised into us, and into our sin, to take our sin upon Himself, and bear it for us, and His own judgement against it, the hatred of His goodness against all evil, His righteous wrath against all wrong and all wrongdoing, eternal and utter and complete death, the fullness of death, death upon a cross, having become a curse to God, as He had had it written of Himself in the Law: *Cursed is He who is hanged upon a tree.*

He has borne His own judgement for our evil and ungodliness and unbelief, to make us right with Him and righteous before His judgement. He has borne the fullness of death for us so that we can live with Him for ever in His Kingdom, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory. He has borne all judgement and won for Himself the right to judge whomever He will free from death and damnation.

This God had resolved in His heart from eternity, from before the world began. And as such, it was always real in the heart of God; and nothing is as real as that which is real to God. Therefore is it that He could raise a little girl from death even before it had actually all taken place; therefore is it that He could restore a woman from her uncleanness and deliver her from the death that had already begun and made itself manifest in her life.

Therefore is it, also, that already in days of old the sacrifices that pointed to His own sacrifice actually and really proclaimed to His people atonement for their sins and righteousness before Him. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, as He said it in the Law, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.*

Now He has His Church proclaim His promise to all sinners, of full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, of rescue from death and damnation, of eternal life with Him in the fullness of His goodness and His glory, all on account of what He Himself has done for us. And with His promise, all that He promises is given, really given, to all who hear His promise, and take it to heart. He who had Himself baptised into our death has sinners baptised into His own life. He who gave His body over to be crucified, and shed His blood for us for our salvation, gives His body and blood for us to eat and drink, for real, in His festive meal of salvation, with all that He is and all that is His, His heavenly Kingdom and His eternal life. And we shall live with Him.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen.*