

THE SHORTNESS AND UNCERTAINTY OF LIFE



Matthew 6:1 "Jesus said, 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.'"

Forty-three years ago, I was the newly ordained, assistant priest at the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill in Boston, a famous Anglo-Catholic congregation that is best known these days for its music. Each week, a fully paid choir sings a Solemn High Sung Mass with all the pomp and circumstances one can imagine. Shortly after I arrived, a beloved member of this wonderful choir died. I can't remember anymore exactly what he died of, perhaps it was AIDS at that time, though knowing Anglican choir members the way I do now, I suspect that he died of riotous living.

I do remember that his funeral service was magnificent, as his fellow choir members sang for him the famous *Fauré Requiem*. This was the first time that I had ever heard that music, and I thought it was stunning, and I think of my friend every time I hear it now. Indeed, I listened to it again this afternoon. All those who spoke of the deceased during the service painted a

picture of a person full of life and energy and kindness. I remember that there was a swell of people at the reception afterwards in the Parish Hall, and lots more laughter and frivolity and a great deal of gentle tears.

Later that afternoon, it was my task to perform the short graveside service for the immediate family at the Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, a quiet, hidden spot along the Charles River. There was the first snow of the season covering the ground and the air at that time of year was hushed and still and chilled. You could not hear the sounds of the distant city, only the waters of the river silently moving down towards Massachusetts Bay. And so it was that I remembered that verse from the ancient hymn that bespeaks of "Time like an ever-rolling stream bearing all her sons away." The sky was dark and cold that day, and I was struck by the contrast between this quiet, dusk graveside service and the earlier one that morning in the church, one which had been full of warmth and light and laughter, with the sounds of Sanctus bells and the smell of incense, a friend remembered who had been so full of life.

And so it was that I knelt down there upon the cold earth and laid a small linen bag of ashes into a hole in the frozen ground, the mortal remains of someone who had once been so vibrant and alive. And I repeated aloud the poetic prayer that has transcended the centuries:

"In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother; and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . . Thou, O God, art immortal, the creator and maker of Mankind; but we are mortal, formed of the earth, and unto the earth shall we return. For so thou didst ordainst when thou created us, saying 'Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shall return.' All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

We are not, with this service tonight and these ashes, practicing our piety before others in order to be seen by them. We are instead just soberly reminding ourselves of the shortness and uncertainty of life, and of the need to live out our lives in earnest, of the need to be mindful of what we are doing with our lives and where we are placing our treasures.

Therefore, I beseech you, my brothers and sister, to spend some time this Lent reflecting upon your own life, giving thanks to God for the very gift of life and breath, and the many blessings we have all received thereof, and also to be mindful of the mercy and forgiveness of God, considering who we are and what we have become. For if you are like most of us, we are not yet the person God is calling us to be, or even the person we

ourselves really want to be, and time is running out. So, spend some time and energy this Lent to change your life a little bit, doing some of those things that you know you ought to do, and avoiding some of the things that you know you ought not to do. Struggling to become more the person you want to be; and the person God longs for you to be, for your sake, and for the sake of others. Go into your room sometime this Lent, and shut the door, and talk to your Father in heaven, in secret, and in openness and honesty, with tears and with woe in your heart, and maybe with a little laughter too, with hope and confidence, in love and in faith, facing the realities of our lives, and of our impending deaths, living out our lives to the fullest, with our eyes open, and our hearts set upon the promises of God, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. Amen.