

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Mal 3:19-20a
Ps 98:5-9
2 Thess 3:7-12
Lk 21:5-19

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The past, the present, and the future walked into a bar. . . . It was tense.

This is the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. A week from now we will honor Christ the King, and following that comes the First Sunday of Advent and the start of a new liturgical year. As each liturgical year draws to a close, the Church turns our attention to “the last things,” which are heaven, hell, and purgatory. Let me start by pointing out that we know very few particulars about the afterlife, and whatever we say about it has to be framed in metaphor and analogy, because we live in a time-bound world – a world of past, present, and future – whereas God is timeless. God dwells in eternal timelessness, and in the afterlife we enter into the timelessness of God. But on this side of the grave all we know is time and the sequential order of time.

Personally, the older I get, the more I welcome and appreciate the prospect of purgatory, and if you’ll bear with me, I’m going to tell you why.

Purgatory is the place – or perhaps I should say more precisely, the state of being – where after death we are purified. Purgatory is where we get to shed the last vestiges of our sinfulness. It’s the state where we get to finish whatever work of sanctification we have left unfinished and incomplete in this lifetime.

Catholic children of my generation learned our religion through the Baltimore Catechism. At the very beginning of the catechism we were taught that God made us to know him, love him, and serve him in this world and to be happy with him forever in the next world. God created us with a mission and a destiny. The mission: to know, love, and serve God in this world. The destiny: to be happy with God forever in the next.

The human race as God created us originally was capable of eternal happiness with God, but human beings lost that capacity through original sin. Jesus came to show us the way, to *be* the way, back to the Father. Jesus restored our capacity for eternal happiness. Jesus showed us that what we have to do is put God at the center, instead of all the stuff we use as a substitute for God.

In the 20th century a Swiss theologian, Father Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote about Jesus’s descent into hell. In the oldest statement of our faith – so old, in fact, that we call it the Apostles’ Creed – the Church proclaims that Jesus descended into hell. In the three days he spent in the tomb, from Good Friday until Easter Sunday morning, Jesus

descended into hell. Father von Balthasar thought that as horrible as the physical torments of Jesus's passion were, the mental and emotional and psychological toll was just as horrible. On the evening of Holy Thursday Jesus sweated blood anticipating Good Friday in anguish, and on the cross Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For the first time in his life, Jesus did not feel his connection with God; mentally, psychologically, and emotionally he was cut off. And that sense of abandonment and isolation continued after he died. That was the descent into hell, according to Fr. von Balthasar. Hell is the place where God is not.

Sin cuts us off from God. When we die in our sinfulness, we are isolated; we feel as if God has abandoned us, but in fact it is we who have abandoned God. Jesus descended into hell and experienced the terrible isolation of hell. . . . And yet Jesus did not lose faith. In his isolation and sense of abandonment, he trusted in his Father, and his faith and trust are what pulled him through to the glory of the resurrection.

And so it may be, we hope, for us. If Father von Balthasar's theory holds water, then even though we may feel cut off, isolated, and abandoned, if we do not lose hope and faith and love, Jesus will be there on the other side to pull us through.

What do we need to do, how do we need to be, in order to be capable of eternal happiness with God in heaven? In St. Matthew's Gospel, in Jesus's sermon on the mount, he told us, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." He didn't say, "Be all-powerful," or "Be all-knowing." No, he told us to be perfect in the way God the Father is perfect. God is, in one manner of speaking, "simple," by which I mean that God has no moving parts: God dwells in timelessness, lacking nothing, missing nothing, needing nothing. To be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, we must need nothing except God. As St. Paul put it in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, God's grace is sufficient for us.

The older I get, the more clearly I see how far short of perfection I fall, by whatever standard one measures perfection. But certainly I fall short of Jesus's standard of perfection. I am needy. I am attached to so much stuff, to so many honors, to so many desires and ambitions. I can say, "God's grace is sufficient for me," but that's not how I live. For that very reason, I find hope in the doctrine of purgatory. In purgatory I too may cry out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" It may well happen that I feel utterly alone and cut off and abandoned. I pray that in that darkness, as I search for perpetual light, the grace of God will have taken sufficient root in me that I can tell myself and keep telling myself, "God's grace is sufficient for me," as one by one the attachments, the desires, and the needs that I take to the grave with me fall away. And when the last of them is gone, I will be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect. And my destiny will be fulfilled: I will be capable of eternal happiness with God in heaven.