

Our Gospel today presents us with a question which each one of us has to face some day, - and it is a question that is particularly apt, for next Sunday, in the Gospel, we'll listen to Mark's story of how Jesus went to his crucifixion and death, - while the following Friday, Good Friday, for us Christians, the whole day is given over the reflecting on the Passion and Death of Jesus.

How did Jesus prepare for death? Was it a thought he was comfortable with? How large did the thought of death feature in his life?

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus express that he is anything but comfortable with the thought: "Now my soul is troubled, yet what should I say? Father, save me from this hour? But it is for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

We hear almost the same words repeated in his Agony in the Garden: "Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it."

Jesus was troubled by the thought of death, yet he responded to this emotion with the courageous statement: "but it is for this purpose that I have come to this hour, - to glorify your name."

It is here in this statement that Jesus gives us an insight in how we should approach our own mortality: "Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest."

Life, as Jesus tells us here, is defined by death. All that we try to gain, all that we strive to build up for ourselves, is limited by death. Some of what we do may survive after us, but there is no more that we can add to it, nor can we draw any further profit from it.

It is in that context that Jesus shares his own vision, his understanding, his insight. Death is the end of our earthly life, but it is the dying to ourselves that we during our life-time that makes life fruitful, the self-giving that makes it yield a rich harvest.

In that regard it is worth recognizing that fear of death, of losing oneself, is at the root of every fear we have or experience, every kind of clinging, and all kinds of selfishness. And that is exactly what Jesus taught. You can love your mortal life, but in the end you will lose it. No creature has done otherwise, - not even Jesus or Mary. In calling us, his disciples, to hate the life of this world, Jesus is urging us to

abandon our doomed desire for self-preservation. It won't work! It is self-giving that brings life, and that is what Jesus has shown us, even in his death on the Cross.

Still, Jesus makes no pretense that this is easy. We know he gave much time to prayer, and that on the night before he died for us, he sweated blood in anguish at the suffering he was faced with, but for the good that would come from it, he went through with it.

It is a situation many of us, who have phobias, are familiar with, we sweat blood at the situation we fear. Yet, if we could break through that fear, our life would be so much richer in experiences, fulfilment and joy.

Again, we would benefit if we remembered how Jesus began his public life: no fanfare, no tickets on himself, but beginning with a message that the kingdom of God is at hand, -or is here, - and backing that up with touching and healing a leper, responding to people in their need, and showing them where true happiness lay, as he taught them the Beatitudes and the other parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

Self-giving begins like that, in little ways, but as we turn away from ourselves to focus on others, our love for them grows and our readiness to give of ourselves increases as well, and it is to the extent that we've been able to make that self-gift that our eternal happiness depends.

Today's Gospel affirms what I've just said, where we read: "Anyone who loves his life loses it; while anyone who hates his life in this world, will keep it for the eternal life. Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, for wherever I am, my servant will be too. Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!

The Father responds with affirmation, and Jesus then makes a startling statement: "Now sentence is being passed on this world; now the prince of this world is to be overthrown. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all to myself."

"Now is the prince of this world to be overthrown!" Coming to his hour, Jesus defeats fear, and in that very act of passing through fear of death He is able to return to the Father, and to gain for us that same strength and that same glorious life as well. May God grant each one of us the grace and the power to believe firmly in this article of faith.