

11. January 2023

## The fear of death

Heb 2:14-18

*Brethren, since all the children share the same human nature, he too shared equally in it, so that by his death he could set aside him who held the power of death, namely the devil, and set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death. For it was not the angels that he took to himself; he took to himself the line of Abraham. It was essential that he should in this way be made completely like his brothers so that he could become a compassionate and trustworthy high priest for their relationship to God, able to expiate the sins of the people. For the suffering he himself passed through while being put to the test enables him to help others when they are being put to the test.*

Today's reading tells us about the Devil's influence on our fear of death. It is true that death is a "great unknown" for us, and Holy Scripture even designates it as our enemy (cf. 1 Cor 15:26).

But how do we face death, how do we deal with our fear of it?

There is no doubt that Satan stirs up our fear of death and wants to prevent us from understanding death as the great passage to eternal life; to eternal life with God, which is offered to us through his Son Jesus Christ, once we have passed through the Judgement.

Indeed, death is a force that can arouse anguish and existential fears in us. When death is still under the dominion of the devil, it can seem like a meaningless end, a simple fading into nothingness, into the unknown, into despair... Then suffering before death would also be meaningless, and so the idea of euthanasia can arise as an option presented in terms of mercy.

In suicide, too, the forces of evil are at work, driving the person to such despair that he or she comes to think that the best way out is to take refuge in death.

In what sense, then, did Jesus destroy the dominion of death and what is the change that takes place when we encounter Him?

Faith is the elementary prerequisite for overthrowing the power of death. It is this faith that announces to us that Jesus rose from the dead. And this same resurrection assures us that we too, after our death, will be transformed and enter into a completely new existence, in which we will live eternally with God. Holy Scripture testifies to it.

If this faith floods our hearts, then we have already won the crucial battle against Satan's dominion over death. Death is no longer for us a disappearance into nothingness, nor a door into the unknown, nor a fall into an endless abyss... Quite the contrary: death becomes for us the last step to return definitively to the house of the Heavenly Father.

A next step in snatching death from the clutches of the enemy is to keep the memory of death alive in our lives. Holy Scripture tells us: *"In everything you do, remember your end, and you will never sin"* (Sir 7:36).

What does this mean? Again, it is faith that teaches us that our life is under God's gaze and that one day we will have to give an account to him. This is a very serious point, for it makes it clear to us that we are responsible for every act we commit or fail to commit. We will be judged according to the extent to which we responded to God's love, according to the degree of knowledge we have had of Him.

This awareness can instil in us a holy fear and remind us of the seriousness of our existence. As a result, we will lead our lives with greater responsibility. But this thought should not make us afraid, for God is always ready to forgive us, to strengthen us and to lift us up. But He certainly wants us to do our utmost to fulfil His will.

In this way death can become our teacher. It is no longer the one that terrifies us and enslaves us through fear, but it awakens us and reminds us of the essentials of life.

Jesus went through death for us in all its dimensions. Let us remember the agony He suffered for us in Gethsemane. He experienced this reality in all its harshness and even sought human comfort from his disciples, but they were not able to accompany him in this difficult hour. The Gospel tells us that it was an angel who strengthened Him.

Therefore, let us turn to the Lord when we are oppressed by the fear of death and invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit in the face of these fears. Our Lord knows them well, for He Himself took on our human nature with all its realities.