

November always ushers in another set of questions in our faith journey. We start off with ALL SAINTS and our call to holiness, and ALL SOULS reminding us of our mortality. The gospel images speak of the end things – heaven, hell, purgatory and judgment. It's sobering stuff, but good stuff. Important stuff. Stuff we all have to deal with.

A couple of questions can check our cavalier attitude about these things, or even our denial of them. Have we planned our funeral? Do we have a will? Is it up-to-date? Have we left anything to our parish? 2/3 of Americans die without a will! It's a horrible thing to do to those we leave behind. I have seen the lack of will destroy a family on more than one occasion. Put a few dollars (and treasured sentimental items) on the table – and people quickly seem to lose their focus – and even their minds! Catholics are also not known for their fidelity in tithing – leaving 10% of our will to the church would be one way of making some restitution of that.

Death is the most daunting, unsettling, and heavy topic there is, for all of us, our occasional false bravado notwithstanding. When we say that we are not afraid of dying, mostly we're whistling in the dark, and even there, the tune comes out easier when our own death remains an abstract thing – something in the indefinite and far-away future. My thoughts here no doubt fit that description – whistling in the dark! But surely even whistling in the dark is better than denial.

But I often think of death in this way. BILLIONS AND BILLIONS of people have managed it! And everyone, including myself, is going to have to manage it. A hundred years from now, every one of us reading these words will have had to manage our own death.

Billions and billions have managed this – men, women, children, even babies. Some were old, some were young; some were prepared, some were not; some welcomed it, some met it with bitter resistance; some died from natural causes, some died through violence; some died surrounded by love and loved ones, some died alone without any human love whatsoever surrounding them; some died peacefully, some died crying out in fear; some died at a ripe old age, some died in the prime of their youth or even before that; some suffered for years from seemingly meaningless dementia with those around them wondering why God and nature seemed to cruelly keep them alive; others in robust physical health with seemingly everything to live for took their own lives; some died full of faith and hope, and some died feeling only darkness and despair; some died breathing out gratitude, and some died breathing out resentment; some died in the embrace of religion and their churches, some died completely outside of that embrace; and some died as Mother Teresa, while others died as Hitler. But every one of them somehow managed it, the great unknown, the greatest of all unknowns. It seems it can be managed. And nobody has come back from the other world with horror stories about dying (given that all our horror movies about ghosts and haunted houses are pure fiction, through and through).

Most people, I suspect, have the same experience that I do when I think about the dead, particularly about persons I have known who died. The initial grief and sadness of their loss eventually wears off and is replaced by a mysterious sense that it's alright, that they are alright, and that death has in some strange way, washed things clean. In the end, we have a pretty good feeling about our dead loved ones and about the dead in general, even if their departure from this earth was far from ideal, as for instance if they died angry, or through immaturity, or because they committed a crime, or by suicide. Somehow it eventually all washes clean and what remains is the deep sense, a solid intuition, that wherever they are they are now in better and safer hands than our own.

As a young seminarian, in college Latin, we had to translate Cicero's treatise on aging and dying from Latin into English. I was 18 years old at the time, but was very taken by Cicero's thoughts on why we shouldn't fear death. He was stoic, but, in the end, his lack of fear of dying was a little like many women's approach to birth: Given how universal it is, we should be able to manage it too!

Here's a kernel from Cicero: "Death should be held of no account! For clearly the impact of death is negligible if it utterly annihilates the soul, or even desirable, if it conducts the soul to some place where it is to live forever. What, then, shall I fear, if after death I am destined to be either not at all -- or happy?

Our faith tells us that, given the justice of God – as well as the benevolence and mercy of the God -- that we have 2 options – heaven, or hell. Interesting that while the church teaches that there IS a hell, it's never said that anyone is in it! We just don't know – and our doctrine of Purgatory reminds us that God simply never gives up on us – even in the grave. Which pushes us more toward the heaven option, happiness, hopefully awaits us. And we already intuit that. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, SOME LIGHT-HEARTED THOUGHTS ON A VERY HEAVY SUBJECT, posting of 18 November, 2012)

HAPPY NOVEMBER! And thank you for all that you do to serve Christ and build up His Kingdom here on earth! Thank you for the privilege to walk this journey with you!