

THE EASTER HOPE AND THE BELIEF IN MORTALITY

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Imagine that first Easter morning the Scriptures describe! Imagine the astonishment, wonder, and joy as the word spread! He is risen! Our Lord is risen indeed! He is not dead! He has been seen again! The tomb is empty! He is with us — alive forever!

And after nineteen and a half centuries, for the Christian the wonder is still there, the excitement, the promise and hope of God's victory over sin and death, a victory in which we share. Easter morn is indeed a time for rejoicing. It means the resurrection of the springtime, the promise of new life. It is reflected in the burgeoning buds of the forsythia which graces our chancel, and the beautiful lilies look like trumpets spreading the good news in the scented air. And on such a glorious day as this, we can appreciate Browning's lines: "The year's at the spring, and day's at the morn, morning's at seven, the hill-side's dew-pearled, the lark's on the wing, the snail's on the thorn. God's in His heaven. All's right with the world."

And the wonder, the miracle, of Easter is that earth's darkest day, Good Friday, and earth's brightest day, Easter, are just one day apart. However we understand the Easter story in detail, we see that something happened, something happened to change the disciples from a defeated, despairing, dejected group of mourners on that dark Friday, whose candidate for the Messiah had been ignominiously hanged on the cross, into a stout band of fearless, forceful missionaries convinced by Easter that their Lord was alive and at hand. And for the Christian whose celebration of Lent and Holy Week culminates in Easter, there is a rebirth, a renewal of a sense of God's creative love poured out to redeem man, saving him from sin and for that life abundant which we can share in Christ. As the darkness of Friday turned to the dawning of Easter, as the death of winter changes to the life of spring, as the stone is rolled away from the tomb, we see the Easter hope bright and clear — as Whittier expressed it — "that life is ever lord of death, and love can never lose its own".

This is the Easter hope — this belief in immortality. Then why is the sermon title "Belief in Mortality"? This could be an error — what I like to call a typical graphical error (we're capable of them). But the title is as I intended it. And I propose to point up the Easter message by contrasting it with a rival philosophy of salvation or religion which is committed to the doctrine that the soul is mortal. This is to better understand what is involved. And to discuss the doctrine of the mortality of the soul is to face the criticism of those who feel that in an age of science we can no longer believe in immortality — that it is in effect a dream held by those afraid to die, afraid to face death.

About half a century before Christ, the Roman poet Lucretius wrote an important book called De Rerum Natura — On The Nature of Things. In it he describes and defends the views of an earlier philosopher, Epicurus, who founded the philosophy of Epicureanism. This philosophy adopted the atomic theory and taught that everything, including the mind and vital spirit of man, was made up of configurations of material atoms; that when you died, the particular arrangement of

atoms that identified you is destroyed; that when you're dead, you're dead; and that the whole purpose of life was to try intelligently to maximize pleasure by seeking freedom from pain in the body and freedom from trouble in the soul. Their rational materialism enabled them to reject all belief in an afterlife, all fears about the future, and thus contributed to their goal of peace of mind, and freedom from trouble in the soul.

It is clear that Lucretius saw Epicurus as a kind of savior and adopted the philosophy as a kind of religious way of life. This philosophy was a way of life for many Romans in the time of Jesus. Lucretius writes, "When human life lay groveling in men's sight, crushed to earth by the dead weight of superstition, a man of Greece was first to raise mortal eyes in defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of the gods did not crush him. He longed to loose the locks of nature. He ventured far out beyond the flaming ramparts of the world and voyaged in mind throughout infinity. Returning victorious he proclaimed what can be and what cannot, and by his triumph we are lifted level with the skies." The revelation of Epicurus is that all events have mechanical causes so man can be freed from fears about the actions of the gods and saved from fears of death.

Lucretius argues stoutly for the mortality of the soul — argument is piled upon argument — there are twenty-one proofs in all. One might think one solid argument would suffice for a rational scientific point of view, but he wants to be sure everyone is convinced. His conclusion is that death is nothing to us, and no concern of ours. When we are, death is not; when death is, we are not. Even if the matter that composes us should be reassembled some time after our death, and the light of life given anew, this would be of no concern of ours once the chain of identity is snapped. So just as the sufferings of early ages do not touch us today, we will have no part in the sufferings of the future after our death. We shall be nothing and nothing can happen to us.

This doctrine of mortality, let me stress, is presented as a saving gospel. Believing this sets your mind at rest, gives you peace of mind. Lucretius pulls out all stops in his eagerness to be convincing. Now why this desperate urgency to believe in mortality?

The key is found in the goal of the Epicurean way of life. And this is escape from pain, escape from worry, from trouble, from concerns. Epicurus' walled garden where he taught is symbolic of the wish to withdraw from the troubles of the world. And instead of fears of the unknown hereafter, Lucretius taught that death meant a term to your troubles. It is Lucretius who said, "What joy it is when out at sea the storm winds are lashing the water, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other is enduring in the sea!" Not that anyone's afflictions are a source of delight, but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is joy "indeed". He goes on to say what a joy it is to watch armed battle when you have no part in the peril. And it is clear that he sees his philosophy as a citadel to save him from the pains of life. He cries, "How dark and dangerous is the life in which this tiny span is lived away." And counsels that by resolutely avoiding occasions for trouble one can gain a relative peace of mind and look forward to death as marking a term for our troubles.

There is reflected here in Epicureanism — and I would suggest in any way of life that measures value in terms of pleasure and pain — a sense of despair, a tragic sense of life, where momentary

pleasure is a rare oasis in the desert of existence, where gratification leads to more anxieties and desires. As Schopenhauer said, “It is like the alms thrown to the beggar, so that he can exist to face another day of suffering.” And even when the life we associate popularly with the term Epicureanism, the life of positive pleasure-seeking, is pursued, and pursued successfully, there is an undercurrent of desperation. One’s happiness is dependent on external conditions one cannot control — and the desperate search for enjoyment leads ultimately to boredom or the sense of weariness which comes when life holds no meaning. The poet Swinburne reflects this sophisticated sense of weariness which, like the Epicureans, seemed to welcome death. He writes: “I am tired of tears and laughter and men that laugh and weep, of what may come hereafter, and everything but sleep.” And further: “From too much love of living, from hope and fear set free, we thank with brief thanksgiving, whatever gods may be, that no man lives forever, that dead men rise up never; that even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea.”

These lines of Swinburne express the very same weariness of mind and spirit that the Epicureans represented. And when we see this weariness, we understand what motivates the belief in mortality. It is a weariness with life itself. The point of the whole matter is this: it is not the case that immortality is a dream of those who are afraid to die; it is truer to say that belief in mortality is the hope of those afraid to live — afraid to face life as an ongoing challenge and opportunity with all the risks and troubles life involves. In contrast, to believe in immortality is to look forward to continuing creative experience, to trust in God’s love and care in the future we cannot see but which we can face in confidence because of the mercies and love we have already received from His providence and care. To believe in mortality as the Epicureans did, as Swinburne did, is to look forward to death as a release from the burdens of life. To believe in immortality, as the early Christians did, is to look forward to the triumph of goodness over the evils of life, to see death as overcome in victory by the power of God’s love, to see that the sufferings, troubles, pains of man, like those caught up in the suffering of the cross, are transformed by the power of God’s creative love into the peace which passes all understanding.

No wonder that Roman world began to hear with eagerness the message of the early Christians of a life more abundant.

What, then, should we conclude as Christians today?

The Christian attitude, I think, is not to be anxious about the nature of the hereafter, but to continue to trust in the creative power of God, to commit ourselves, as did Jesus, in faith to His hands. It is to recognize, too, I think, the way life and death are intertwined, as with the rhythm of the seasons, the wonder of growth, where the death of the seed gives birth to the blade of wheat. It is to see that life itself is a series of little deaths, which are at the same time new beginnings, new births. Birth itself is surely the death of pre-natal life; but a larger life is born. And the whole process of growing is a series of bumps and triumphs. Think of a child’s first steps. And when success comes, the baby is no more, but a more competent self emerges. Think of the embarrassing moments, the minor crises we’ve all had in growing — in living — when we’ve said, “I thought I’d die”; and in a sense something did die - false pride, perhaps - and something better was born. And so it goes, life as a series of little deaths, and each time something dies, something better is born. May not death itself be the last in this series of little

deaths in life, and the beginning of a whole new existence? We who believe in life — not death — trust that it is so.