

“Today is a good day to die.” I think that line comes from an old Star Trek episode as Warf was about to enter a Klingon battle. But it is a line that we could say each day as we get out of bed, equally as well as saying, “Today is a good day to be alive.” Death is not something we like to think about very often, especially our own death. But it is a subject difficult to avoid on a day like today, Ash Wednesday. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” is a rather stark reminder that we will not live in our physical bodies forever. There is dust in our future. When we are reminded that we will die one day, we cannot help but be aware what a wonderful gift it is to be alive today.

I am not a morning person at heart, and so even though I get up, it doesn't necessarily mean that I wake up. Don't tell me anything important until I have had my first cup of coffee. It seems to me that many of us go through life that way. We may get up, go through the motions, and never quite wake up to the beauty and sparkle of being truly alive. Perhaps the real problem is being neither dead or alive, like zombies. Being aware of our mortality can heighten our awareness of being alive. That is why the warrior can say “It is a good day to die,” because when the prospect of death is at hand, the senses become sharper, colors are brighter, food tastes better, roses smell more fragrant, events seem to slow down. At the same time, the warrior has prepared for death, and will not cling to life so tightly that he cannot risk himself in battle.

That seems to me to be the proper attitude toward our mortality – to live to the fullest in the available time to us, even while ready to die at any moment, without clinging too tightly to life. It is our Christian attitude toward death that makes that possible. To believe that there is another form of life that waits for us to be born into it through death is to anticipate something incredibly beautiful. When we view death this way, then we can dare to risk life, not in some

foolhardy daredevil sort of way, but to know that our decisions, what we do with our lives may not be as important as we sometimes think. We can enjoy life, enjoy God's good creation, live in the knowledge of being loved and forgiven, secure that there is a place for us in his love even after death. Nothing else is all that important.

The disciplines of Lent are a way of cultivating that attitude. Traditionally, during this time of Lent we are called to the disciplines of self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, reading scripture, alms giving.

Self-examination and repentance means taking stock of how we have lived, and knowing that there are some things that should change. There is a kind of death in this discipline, because when we find that there is something that needs to change, we must die to that old self that enjoyed that, and take on a new kind of life. Too often I talk with people who live with an unnecessary load of guilt that prevents them from truly enjoying their relationships, keeps them from truly being awake to the glories of creation around them. They need to die to their guilt. Some might benefit from private confession of their sins and seek forgiveness through the sacrament of reconciliation, which is available to you. Check the prayer book on p. 447 to see what it is all about, and talk to me if this is something you would like to do. I try to do a personal confession myself during Lent, and there is always something about it that gives a new sense of living clean and unburdened. I guess that's grace.

Prayer is how we maintain our relationship with God. How can we know what he wants for us, how can we know that he loves us, unless we spend time with God? I invite you to spend some time with God in prayer, simply being with him. Many people look at prayer as a duty or as a time-out from real life. But prayer time can be life-giving, a time of brilliant realization of what life in God has to give us. It is through my discipline of prayer during a Lent several years

ago that I came to the decision to seek ordination. That was life-changing, and for me, life-giving, even though it meant dying to my old profession.

Fasting is something that used to be assumed we would do, especially on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, though it is not so popular these days. Fasting can help us to grow in appreciation for God's gifts when we miss what we have been accustomed to, what we have taken for granted. Again, we find a small death in the discipline of fasting, because we die to our desires and to our self-indulgence, in order to see more clearly the life God calls us to. Not all of us can or should fast, especially if you have a medical condition that prevents it. But there are other ways of self-denial, such as giving up TV, or reading trashy novels, or playing mindless video games. By dying to those habits and desires that have become out of proportion to our lives, we can appreciate more keenly the pleasures that God has designed for us.

Another approach to self-denial might not be in giving something up, but in taking on something new. You might consider taking on a new ministry, reaching out to someone in need.

Study of scripture and meditating on the Word will help align our understanding with God's desires for us as individuals and as a community. Even this takes a certain dying to self, as we acknowledge that we do not know all that we should. It creates humility, as we learn from others.

Alms-giving is yet one more small death, as we give away part of our selves that we have defined in our possessions. We all know that when we die, we cannot take any of our wealth with us. As they say, shrouds have no pockets. People who know they are going to die shortly will often give away their possessions to those they think will especially appreciate them.

Maybe a practice in Lent might be to start giving away some of those things that we own that we

don't absolutely need. It is hard to risk new things, try new things in life, when we have to have a moving van follow to bring everything with us. Perhaps we could lighten the load a bit.

All of these disciplines are in one way or another small deaths. But if approached with the right attitude, they are not morbid. We will find that they do not narrow our perspective on life, but rather broaden it and lighten it. Small deaths give us small resurrections. Perhaps we can begin to look at such disciplines as small deaths that are practice for the real thing. And if these disciplines give us small resurrections, we can look forward to the resurrection that we will share with Christ.

We will all return to dust one day. But remember that God loves the dust, too. Even dust is part of God's creation. Dust is what we were made from in the first place. Whether we are dust, or flesh and blood, God loves us either way. As it says in Romans, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

It is a good day to die. It is a good day to be alive.