

All Souls, 2014

1. Had my Father lived, he would have been 108 today. He was a good man, but a flawed man as well.

Unfortunately while growing up, I generally focused upon his weakness of alcoholism. And it wasn't until later, much later I am ashamed to say, that I was able to see his positive qualities as well:

For instance, he always sided with the underdog—always!

When he asked an African American man who worked for him how his vacation went, he was told that he and his family were not allowed into restaurants and were refused the use of gas station restrooms as well; this was in the 1950s in Northern California and this ugly reality infuriated my Father.

He also couldn't say "no" to anyone selling anything at our front door, which accounted for our formidable collection of Jehovah Witnesses magazines of "Watch Tower" and "Awake."

When my Mother was away visiting family in Louisiana, she always came home to a bunch of useless kitchen items that he had purchased while watching T.V. Commercials.

As a young man, he was an outstanding athlete in track, pole vaulting (where he barely missed going to the Olympics), baseball, boxing and so forth; and during WWII, he participated in the Battle of the Bulge, where upon he was awarded the bronze star.

Furthermore, my Father had a wonderful dry sense of humor.

He went to daily Mass and then would stay around & do odd jobs around the church. Once when Monsieur Wade, pastor of Christ the King parish in Pleasant Hill, California, saw him come out of the sacristy, he suspiciously asked my Father what he was doing in there; my Father replied that he was sampling the altar wine and wondered if there was any cheese & crackers in the rectory to go with it?

Apparently, Monsieur didn't think that this was funny at the time, which greatly amused my Father, but when I retold his story at my Father's funeral, monsieur finally did crack a smile.

For reasons unknown to me, my Father never made his first Holy Communion and so at my first Mass as a priest, he did so, after taking instructions. When Msgr. asked why, after 64 years, why he decided to do so at this time, he replied: "For the kid."

Daddy died of a stroke in 1995, the same year that my Mother died.

2. Well, today we are celebrating the feast of All Souls and that brings up the issue of death, the issue of our deaths. After all, death is so very personal.

We may be wrapped in the love of family & friends when dying, but we will be the ones going over to the other side by ourselves. And so, what can we expect?

Needless to say, I don't have an explicit answer to this question, but I did read a story about a gravely ill man who was about to leave his doctor's office when he turned and said: Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side? Very quietly, the doctor said: I don't know. You don't know, replied the man; you, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?

The doctor had his office in his house and was holding the handle of the door leading into his home; on the other side of the door came a sound of scratching and whining. And as he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped on him with eager excitement. Turning to the patient, the doctor said: Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing...I know that my Master is there and that is all that I need to know!

It's a simple story, but it brings into focus our relationship with our God.

If Jesus is a distant, somewhat an inconvenient figure in our lives, then what we do not know about what is on the other side of death will bring us many, troubling thoughts.

But if Jesus is someone close to us, a friend with whom we enjoy spending time, then our focus will be upon greeting this loyal and loving friend and not upon what we do not know about what is on the other side of this life.

3. All Soul's Day is marked on our worship calendar to remember the faithful departed who NOW know life eternal in God's presence.

It is a day, not of mourning, but of celebrating, as we remember those who have experienced the final transforming power of God's love through the door of death.

Certainly, it is only human to be sad because we no longer have our loved ones close by, but we should not just think of what we've lost; rather we should reflect upon what they've gained!

And so here, on All Soul's day, we call to mind our Lord's victory over death, through his glorious resurrection from the grave.

As far as we are concerned, there is a vital awareness wrapped up in All Soul's Day.

Put simply, it is the awareness that when death visits us at the end of our earthly life, there is a new life born of God's love that totally embraces and transforms us.

But death, painful as it can be for loved ones left behind, death is not a defeat.

In fact, until we come to the threshold of death and cross over, none of us can know the fullness of God's love for us, we simply cannot know the fullness of the love awaiting us.

After all, we're not talking about an uphill battle here; heaven is for us to lose.

And it is never too late to change the direction of our lives. I read a story about Alfred Nobel who woke up one day only to read his own obituary in the newspaper; actually it was his brother who had died. Anyway he read how he was a great industrialist who had amassed a considerable fortune from manufacturing weapons of unimaginable destructions. The newspaper ended its story by calling him a "merchant of death." Alfred was stunned because this was not how he wanted to be remembered. Well today, Alfred Nobel is not remembered so much as the inventor of dynamite, but for the prestigious Nobel Prizes. He later wrote that everyone ought to have the chance to alter his obituary in midstream and write a new one.

Truth be told, we all still have time: time to tell people how much we love them. Time to say that I am sorry and ask forgiveness. Time to minister to our aging parents, forgotten relatives or neighbors. Each day can be a chance to visit and care for one another, to learn patience, to recognize and rid ourselves of our prejudices.

We are reminded of this wondrous reality in the scriptures: For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day.

We can, with the help of the Bible, peek into the unknown and muse about heaven's glory. But only at the moment of death, when we breathe our last, when our eyes are closed in this life never to open again here on earth, only at that moment is God our Father able to give us, show us, bless us with the victory over death promised us by Jesus Christ.

Is there any more welcoming sight, after a long night of driving, than a hotel with the vacancy sign lit up? Just to know that there is a place for us, a place to lay our weary heads, a safe place of rest... Jesus knows about this need; he, who came to this world as a tiny infant greeted only by NO VACANCY signs in Bethlehem, he has made sure that we will be treated differently. At the end of our life's journey, isn't it wonderful to know that God will have a place saved for us?