

## **“How to Find the Path to Our True and Lasting Home as Nomads in This World”**

Homily Given on the Occasion of the Memorial Mass for Deceased Homeless  
Most Rev. Salvatore Cordileone, Archbishop of San Francisco  
St. Patrick Church, San Francisco  
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Readings: 2 Cor 5:1.6-10; Ps 23; Mt 25:31-46

It is an ancient and venerable tradition in our Catholic family to offer prayer and Masses for our deceased loved ones, especially so during this month of November. November is toward the end of the year; it's toward the end of the season of autumn. Winter is on its way—although it doesn't feel like that today. But that's the idea: There's a sense of things coming to an end and a passing into silence, the silence of winter, which reminds us of the silence of death. It's a reminder to us of the end of life and of how fleeting our life is in this world.

This is what St. Paul is speaking about in this passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians when he is comparing the body to a tent. As he says, "We know that if our earthly dwelling and tent should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven."

Now, a tent is a temporary dwelling. It's sort of a makeshift dwelling. This is a disturbingly accurate description of those who have died in the streets. Most of them do not even have a literal tent. For those who do, it's something of a luxury, that they can only hold onto with great insecurity. More often, their only dwelling is the figurative tent of their literal body.

This way, the homeless become for us a symbol, almost a sort of a sacrament, of the spiritual state of every one of us. This is our spiritual heritage as the people of God. This is the

background of this image that St. Paul uses. The tent is the type of a dwelling of a nomadic people, people who are constantly on the move. This was our ancient Jewish ancestors after they left the slavery of Egypt. They were nomads for a long time. First of all, there were the forty years they were wandering in the Sinai desert looking for their way to the Promised Land.

And even after they entered into the Promised Land and took possession of it, for a long time, there was this period of the Judges, where they were still nomads. They were living in tents. Only later, in the period of the Kings, beginning with Saul, around that time of their history, did they establish a kingdom; that is they put down roots and built buildings. Those are stable structures, a permanent home, a building that can't move from one place to another like a tent.

In St. Paul's thinking, "As long as we are in this world, we are in the state of a nomadic people." We are as our ancestors wandering through Sinai and in the period of the Judges: On our way to a permanent home, which for us is God's kingdom, the kingdom of the next world, because it is a home that does not pass away. His point is that as long as we are in this world, we are a people on a pilgrimage, a movement toward the goal that is eternity, our only true home. And therefore, we must always keep our vision fixed on that ultimate destination that God created us for.

How do we do that? He says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive recompense according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil."

That is, we must remember that we are all are going to face judgment from God. This seems to be something we've forgotten about. We don't think about it very often. We don't hear that much about it anymore. But St. Paul is very clear that we will be judged according to what we did in the body, which refers to, yes, our personal moral life, but also concrete acts of love and mercy, because we carry those out in our body.

This is the meaning of this very vivid scene our Lord portrays in His famous description of the final judgment, the Son of Man separating the sheep from the goats, placing the sheep on His right, who are the righteous, who go off to eternal life, and the goats on His left, who will go off to eternal punishment. This is where the corporal works of mercy come from. And it is certainly a reminder to us of our call to put these works of mercy into concrete action.

But we can look at this description of the Last Judgment in a different way. Now, the standard interpretation—and most interpret it this way—is that this is how we will all be judged. But there are some scripture scholars who look at this a different way. They point out that the word that St. Matthew uses here for “all nations” elsewhere in his Gospel refers to the Gentile nations, those who were not of the Jewish chosen people, and that when Jesus refers to ‘my brothers and sisters,’ he was referring to His disciples, who have become brothers and sisters with Him in baptism.

So their interpretation is that this is how those who are ... oh, the other thing is, that when referring to the Gentile nations, Matthew is writing to a Jewish-Christian audience, so he's referring here to those who are outside the Judeo-Christian religious community. So it's a story about how *they* will be judged. They will be judged according to how they treated others.

When we hear this famous scene of Mathew 25, we think of the merciful acts that we extend, or at least are called to extend, to those in need. But if we look at it closely and bear this other way of looking at this passage in mind, it has a reverse sense. We can think about how concrete acts of love and mercy are shown by our homeless brothers and sisters. They who with so much less than we have, show mercy too. So we with so much more—how much more will we be held to a

higher standard, when it comes to our own moment of rendering an account to God for our lives in this world?

Have we been so merciful? We can so easily and unwittingly slip into somewhat condescending attitudes when we think that we are the ones who have, who give to those who have not. Maybe that's why there is so little mercy in the world. Maybe that is why some people have fooled themselves into thinking that they will not be held accountable for their lives in this world.

This is the idea that everyone is going to heaven, which is another way of saying that no one will be held accountable for their life in this world. We have forgotten that how we live our life in this world will have consequences for how we will live in the next. To forget about the final reckoning always redounds to our harm, and especially harms those who are neediest among us. And that is the irony. In a society that thinks everyone is going to heaven, life for many becomes a living hell because we forget we are going to be held accountable.

Traditionally, at Masses for the dead, well, going back some time in history, a special hymn used to be sung or recited, inserted right before the Gospel reading, between the Psalm and the Gospel, called the Sequence. This is the old *Dies Irae*. It was dropped from the liturgy, but it's—I guess many people considered it a bit too, kind of, pessimistic: It's a lot of hellfire and brimstone, admittedly, as the very title, the first two words in Latin of the hymn, *Dies Irae*, mean Day of Wrath.

But if we look at it closely and with an open mind and open heart, I think we can understand it as a healthy dose of realism, a view with Christian hope woven all throughout. It presents precisely

this scene from Mathew 25, which is very sobering. It gives such a sobering and maybe even chilling description of what it will be like. It drives home the point with vivid imagery. It says:

The mighty trumpet's wondrous tone  
Shall rend each tomb's sepulchral stone  
And summon all before the Throne.

This is Jesus saying here, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, He will sit upon His glorious throne, and all nations will be assembled before Him." And yes, this sense of fearfulness continues with vivid imagery, where it says:

Now death and nature with surprise,  
Behold the trembling sinners rise  
To meet the Judge's searching eyes.  
Then shall with universal dread,  
The Book of Consciences be read,  
To judge the lives of all the dead.  
Oh, what shall I so guilty plead?  
And who for me will intercede,  
When even saints shall comfort need?

But there is also the cry for mercy, evoking again this scene from Matthew 25:

Take me from the goats' accursed band,  
Oh make me with your sheep to stand  
As child of grace at your right hand.

And the plea for mercy continues:

O King of dreadful majesty,  
Grace and mercy you grant free,  
As the fount of kindness, save me.  
Recall, dear Jesus, for my sake  
You did our suffering nature take.  
Then do not now my soul forsake.

He paid the ultimate price for us. So we plead to Him for mercy that we might share life with Him forever.

And along with this, that theme of hope is woven through, such as when it says:

In weariness you sought for me,  
In suffering upon the tree,  
Let not in vain such labor be.

And that is the note upon which it concludes:

When the doomed can no more flee  
From the fires of misery,  
Call the chosen ones, call me.

We throw ourselves upon His mercy. When we live, as He calls us to, lives of mercy, He can give us confidence of safe passage as well. It is good to remember that Jesus is Judge as well as Savior. He holds us accountable, but He also forgives.

Reverential fear and love do go together as is so clearly portrayed in this classic hymn. And both should move us to do everything we can to please our Lord with the help of His grace. And that is why we are here. We gather in this church to offer prayers and the holy sacrifice of the Mass for our deceased homeless brothers and sisters, to assist them on their way to the eternal home that is God's kingdom of heaven. May this work of mercy please our Lord, and may it inspire us to glorify God in our bodies through concrete acts of love and mercy so that when it is our turn to make the passage from this life to the next and face our own final judgment, the great King of all the Ages will give us a place with the sheep at His right hand.