

**November 8, 2020 Rise Up From Your Sleep Homily:** Thanks to the late Walt Disney Americans, in the course of several generations, have been afforded opportunities to see two animated classics based on popular fairy tales; *"Snow White"* and *"The Sleeping Beauty"*.

You may recall that Snow White, described by subjects of the sovereign ruler as the "fairest in the land", angered the jealous evil queen. She poisoned the beauty with an apple, causing her to fall into a deep sleep. The only way Snow White was able to wake from her deep slumber was with a kiss from her prince.

In the story of Sleeping Beauty, a princess is cursed by a sorceress. It is destined that when she turns fifteen, she will prick her finger on a spindle and fall into a deep sleep. And it came to pass that the princess did indeed fall into a deep sleep. Like Snow White, she, too, was reawakened by the kiss of a prince.

In both stories the theme of death (sleep) and resurrection is a key element.

Several biblical scholars speak of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians as a letter of consolation. The city, once a major city in Macedonia and now part of Northern Greece, was home to a fledgling Christian community in the first century of the Christian era. No fewer than three times in this short epistle does Paul make reference to "sleep." This key word was used in the early church to refer to those who had died in the faith of Christ. Paul writes, "We do not want you to be unaware about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope". (I Thess. 4:13) While it is true that even in the literature of pagans, death is often spoken of as "sleep", there is however a notable difference with the Christian faith. The pagan has no hope. He will never reawaken from his slumber. Death meant total annihilation, a descent into a dark hole, oblivion. In the face of death the pagan stood in despair.

Paul has good reason for not grieving over the death of a loved one. Since Jesus died and rose again he believes the dead will likewise rise again. He is emphatic on this very point. Time and again in his letters he insists that there is indeed a life in the hereafter. Those who die in the Lord will be with him unceasingly. "We shall always be with the Lord". (I Thess. 4:17)

Saint Augustine asks, "Why does Paul say that Christians are asleep if not because they will be raised when their day comes"?

Sometime in the late fifties or early sixties a distinguished French philosopher and convert to the Catholic faith, Gabriel Marcel, was invited to offer a lecture at an American Ivy League school, Princeton University. His lecture attracted a large number of students and university professors. In the question and answer period that immediately followed Marcel's lecture, views were exchanged on a variety of issues. Unexpectedly, Marcel had a question of his own that he posed to his audience: "What is your view of death?" A hushed silence followed.

In many of our leading secular universities, the pagan view of death prevails. Belief in an afterlife is routinely mocked. To die is to be reduced to nothingness. One can appreciate why it is a subject best

avoided in the classroom! According to a recent poll, today in England, the country once blest with the faithful witness of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, thirty-eight percent of the population does not believe in God.

At the present time, I am reading a book written by an Irish author, Kevin Toolis, entitled "My Father's Wake: How the Irish Teach Us to Live, Love and Die". He makes some stunning observations about the western world's approach to death. Let me cite a few of them;

"We don't want to intrude on the dying because we don't want to look at the mirror of our own death."

"How can it be possible to never talk out loud about death in a world where everyone dies?"

"Western society has slowly striven and largely succeeded in removing the dead and dying from public sight. We have pulled the curtains across, privatized our mortality and turned death into a whisper."

"Officially, the deceased have become obscene."

We must face our death with courage, and not give in to fear. On the night before his death Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled". (Jn. 14:1) Regrettably the Corona Virus has taken control of our lives and left too many of us quaking in fear. Actually our greatest fear must be committing sin, also a very unpopular subject in our secular culture.

Saint Paul's ringing affirmation of eternal life is punctuated in today's reading. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him all who have fallen asleep." (I Thess. 4:14)

The great apostle is the bearer of "Good News." His consoling words are just as valid for the Christians of the twenty-first century.

Amen!