

Funeral sermon for Rhett Segal

Only recently a Jewish friend, whose two children were at one time enrolled in our parish school, gave me a book as a gift. It was written by a distinguished rabbi, Robert Kahn. In the final chapter of a delightful read, the Rabbi shares a story of visiting an elderly man in a nursing home. Immediately, upon entering the facility, he encountered the manager who was clearly troubled. "Rabbi", he said, "The one you plan to visit leaves his light on all day and all night. See if you can persuade him to turn it off".

After entering the resident's room, the Rabbi could understand why the manager was concerned. He did not see a lamp but a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling swaying in the breeze by the window. The light was excessive. After chatting with the man for a while, he asked him why he burned his light when he was asleep.

His answer was a shocker and left the Rabbi shuddering.

"I'll lie in the dark long enough".

In other words what awaited the disconsolate member of the Chosen People was never ending darkness after death. It meant oblivion, annihilation, a falling into a black hole with no possibility of escape.

Such a bleak, despairing view of life and death did not impress the Rabbi at all. He asks, "Is the end of the day just the night or does the sun rise again?"

The Rabbi's poignant story reminds me of Saint Paul's consoling words to the early Christian community at Thessalonica. The apostle points out that although we mourn the loss of our loved ones, "we do not grieve as others do who have no hope".

What does death mean for a disciple of Jesus? In the funeral liturgy the priest recites the prayer, "For us life is changed, not ended" Death marks the beginning of our everlasting union with Jesus. He passes through the door of death into new, eternal life.

In Sacred Scripture there are few metaphors as revealing as light. God is light. Jesus himself claimed to be the Light of the World. His disciples are called to bear witness to the Light of truth in their daily life and, in one of Saint Paul's letters, are referred to as sons and daughters of light".

Rhett Segal (I called him Rhett Butler) was a son of light. He knew the Catholic faith well and taught it for many years at area high schools. His light shone brightly in the classroom. Today's first reading from the Book of Daniel could very well describe our deceased friend: "The wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament".

According to Kathy, his wife, Rhett prayed the rosary daily. The concluding prayer of the rosary is the "Salve Regina", or, in English, the "Hail, Holy Queen". This magnificent prayer was composed by a blind and crippled monk, Herman of Richenau, over one thousand years ago. His was a life of hardship. This led him to see more clearly than most that his life was an exile from his true home and that he would one day go home. According to one author knowledgeable about his life, "What kept Blessed Herman going was the certitude that the present life was not the only thing God had in store for him, that his exile was temporary and he would one day go home".

In today's gospel reading, which is taken from John's seventeenth chapter, Jesus offers prayer to his Heavenly Father, in which he says, "I wish that where I am they also may be with us". To depart this life and enjoy the everlasting company of Jesus Christ is the single most important objective of our earthly life.

I like to think that Rhett crossed "home plate" before any of us. That, if anything, should increase our resolve to join him in the life hereafter once we have each crossed home plate, too.

So let us pray for a merry reunion at a time known only to God Himself.