



Death and Life : Images of Mortality

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I remember the first diagnosis of the cancer: the fear, the hope, the treatments, the suffering, the weeks gone by. Then the final diagnosis, and the last days; the passage of a life breath by breath; then a final breath, expected, yet not; a life gone, taken away, slowly and painfully consumed by disease; a death suffered through, cried over in creaturely sympathy. I remember the doctor's final words, "Her suffering is over," and remember looking to the corner of the hospital room, to my young son sleeping peacefully on the floor, and to my wife and her father, who had just lost his wife. So death came. And for me, in time, questions: What sense? What response to this suffering, this agony of the dying, and the living?

At one time in my life these questions were of no concern; they were beneath me. I was lost in intellect, kept as if captive in a kind of thoughtfulness. It is still tempting to be taken up by a thinking which aims, arrogantly, at complete understanding and imagines itself supreme. Then I was led, gladly, to the highest regions of thoughtfulness where intellect is paramount and all reality is taken to be, in principle, transparent to thought, to understanding, if just enough reasonable effort and the right method be applied. Everything is to be illuminated by mind, through the light of reason.

But I was helpless before the darkness, the reality of death. I was brought down. In seeking understanding, sympathy and support, I was led thoughtfully to appreciate, as never before, the meaning of some of the metaphors and stories present in our tradition. For example, there is the metaphor of "the Word." I knew, or so I thought, that from Genesis (where God speaks the world into existence) on into the prophetic speaking of the word, and through the revelation of the word made flesh, there is in our tradition focus on the word. "In the beginning was the Word....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 1:14). This metaphor, and the stories incorporating it, gained new meaning. The image of the Word Incarnate, and its meaning for us, should be considered in our response to the suffering of death and life.

I. WORD AND BEING

How radically present "the word" is for us; we are so at home in language that its power and presence are difficult to realize. In speaking the word, any word, there is the physical dimension. There is bodily expression, movement of mouth, of tongue, sounds made, and the like. Yet in speech the physical dimension is not given attention, not focused on. The physical is rendered transparent in the meaning of the word; it is to the meaning of our words that we pay attention. (In reading it is the same: physical marks on paper are taken up and rendered

transparent in meaning.) In language we attend from the physical, the carrier of meaning, to meaning itself. Meaning breaks through the physical; yet meaning cannot exist without the physical. Or put yet another way: meaning is in the sound of the word, but is not of the sound. The word is both meaning and sound.

This sense of the word spoken helps articulate the meaning of being human. As we pay attention to the meaning of our words by transcending the physical, which must still be present, so we pay attention to one another at the level of our meaning. We attend to one another as embodied personalities. We embody and body forth our meaning. Neither in the word nor in the human situation does the physical disappear; in both situations the physical is essentially, yet transparently, present. In both cases the physical dimension gives rise to the dimension of meaning. I am the meaning of my body, and so we all are. I am essentially embodied, both spirit and flesh. In this sense the metaphor of person and word is just right: the word is expressed in person; the person is expressed in the word.

Our tradition, in one sense, points us to this: we are each present as the word is present. As the word is no more without the physical, we are no more without the body. So I understand human suffering before death as never before. In this suffering we witness to what it means to be a creature essentially embodied and essentially more. In creaturely sympathy, in the deepest conviviality, I am with each and every other embodied spirit who knows death. So I understand the meaning of Christ's death as never before, and through his death realize more fully the meaning of another story. I thought I understood the *Phaedo*, Plato's account of the heroic death of Socrates. But now both stories mean more to me than before.

II. TWO STORIES—TWO WORLDS

In Gethsemane Jesus knows his death is before him. Mark tells that he "began to be greatly distressed and troubled" and became "very sorrowful, even to death" (14:33-34). Christ does not want to be alone before his impending death. He speaks out: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me" (14:36). Here is the suffering of death, the agony, the anxiety, sensed to the very marrow: distress, trouble, sorrow "even to death." In dread of death Jesus pleads: "remove this cup from me."

"Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt" (14:36). This confession of faith is an affirmation of creatureliness, the humble recognition of the nature of being

human, of knowing that "I am" and thus that "I will not be," of standing between the finite and the infinite. Christ does not give up before death, even though death means, dreadfully, to be forsaken of life, to be no more in relationship with Abba, the Father. Before death Jesus seeks sympathy and support. He interrupts his prayer and returns to the disciples, to those few who have shared his mission, but they are not with him; they are asleep. Jesus pleads: "Could you not watch one hour?" (14:37). Before his death, he comes to his disciples with a plea which witnesses to the significance of death, and at the same time signifies an affirmation of life, of the importance of being sympathetically one with another.

Finally, Jesus is at the moment of death. In his last words, "Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' ...And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last" (15:34, 37). Christ's death is dreadful.

Here death means to be forsaken, to be separated from life, from creation; it is the end. This is a condition to dread. Jesus, in effect, cries out: “Do not forsake me!” We all share in his crying out, in his agony. This is the sense of death we face, before which we are “greatly distressed and troubled.”

To realize more fully the meaning of Christ’s death, it can be contrasted with the story of the heroic death of Socrates who welcomes death as a friend. In the Athenian prison Socrates knows that he is in his last hours. His sentence is a self-administered dose of poison to be taken at sundown. Socrates is with a group of friends; he turns the conversation toward consideration of death and immortality. He is in his usual calm good humor. I am struck by the whole situation: in his final hours Socrates is calmly considering arguments about death and immortality!

Consider the sense of the arguments—what is said and what is not—and the image of death and life presented. In life the soul is as if in prison in a body whose nature is essentially alien to it. Each person is essentially a soul, understood as an eternal essence. The body is unessential to one’s being and, as a matter of fact, keeps the soul from gaining its natural place: the Eternal, the Divine. A person knows the Eternal because there is a spark of the Divine in everyone, and this spark, the soul, being of the Eternal, cannot die. Death, in fact, is the liberation of the soul from the body; it is the means of freedom for a person to become what that person essentially is. Socrates says this: “Is not what we call death a freeing and separation of soul from body?” (67).^{*} This speaks worlds! The body is material and of this world; the soul is of a different world, is “immortal and imperishable, and our souls will really exist in the next world” (102a). What a striking image: there is no death, really, only the immortal soul.

Socrates presents his life as having been occupied with the true and essential nature of the soul: concern with eternal truth, with thought properly directed, contemplatively occupied with the Eternal, the Real. (So the sense of Plato’s story of the Cave: most people mistake shadows, appearance, for Real-

^{*}All quotations from the *Phaedo* are from Hugh Tredennick’s translation in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairnes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961).

ty. Reality lies beyond, and it is of this and to this Reality that the soul belongs. The soul is foreign to the flesh.) If Socrates feared death this would show his attachment to this world, to mere appearance; he would have lost sight of Reality, of God, of his true and essential nature.

What a sublimely drawn picture. Death is not the end, but the beginning. Death is liberation: “when I have drunk the poison I shall remain with you no longer, but depart to a state of heavenly happiness” (115d). Here Socrates explicitly identifies himself, the “I” of which he speaks, with his soul. The whole conversation concludes on a reasonable note: all these arguments, it is agreed, make immortality highly probable.

Then death comes. The poison, which causes no pain, is drunk and begins to do its work. Socrates calmly lies down to receive death. He has one last request: “Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius” (118a). The Greeks made an offering to Asclepius, the god of healing, after recovering from a sickness. Socrates is not really dying, but coming to life, recovering from an illness. The death of Socrates is sublime, beautiful, peaceful, composed. He was “the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man” (118a) of antiquity. His death and life were sublimely beautiful—exemplary—the perfect expression of his world. Death is a friend to be greeted rationally, in calm good humor, in peace and composure.

The friends of Socrates come to him in his final hours; they pass the afternoon in dialogue. Would quiet contemplation have been preferred? Before his death Socrates “seemed quite happy” (58e); his companions feel “an absolutely incomprehensible emotion, a sort of curious blend of pleasure and pain combined” (59a). After all, life and death mean little, on balance. Weighed against the Eternal, life here and now becomes relatively unimportant, a mere waiting for Eternity. All that really means anything occurs after death, in “the other world...under the providence of God” where “all would be well with him, if it ever has been so with anybody” (58e-59a). Life, in yearning for the “other world” renders earthly existence mere appearance, happenstance. Life on earth, our being in and of time and place, tends to be overwhelmed by Eternity. What is missed in this world is a setting in place, in time, a focus that reminds us of ourselves by imaging us as creatures of the earth, in nature but not of it, both finite and infinite.

III. OUR MORTALITY AND OUR HOPE

We are as the Incarnate Word. No wonder we cry out, as Christ did, against death; no wonder our whole being shudders before death. Jesus really died, does not live on as an immortal soul, and so really not die. The sense of death and life expressed in the gospels is not that of the *Phaedo* where the soul is shackled to the body and but faintly shines through; where all that is good and true in this world is not so in virtue of being in this world, but in spite of it; where this world tends to be understood as mere appearance which ought to be seen through; where death and life are significantly reversed so that dying means coming to life. These images reveal a world. Socrates was the bravest and wisest man of antiquity; his life and death were exemplary. I appreciate the

sense of the Socratic metaphors concerning this world, this time and place, of how it was, what death and life, God and the human self, meant. (Perhaps I should say “mean” since the imagery, this world, is still, in a sense, with us.)

Yet my whole being is sympathetic to Jesus. His is the sense of death before which we shudder. But facing this darkness, in and through the meaning of this death, we are each and all returned to life, which gains new meaning.

In witnessing to what death means to a creature essentially embodied and essentially more, we know death as never before, as if for the first time, and in this knowledge of death are brought to life. In this renewed knowledge, life—all existence—becomes infinitely precious. Every moment becomes no longer a pause before eternity, but a worthwhile presence within history. One comes to this life with a new seriousness and joy; so life gains gravity, gains balance before eternity; the infinite comes into relationship with the finite through the Incarnate Word.

A final remark. Each and everyone of us realizes himself or herself and is realized in and through the Word. We are participants in a revelation created and sustained by the Word and also in a story which is history. As we are known in history and gain meaning only in promise, through faith, so the hope is gained that as each and every life, each and every story, has meaning, the story of stories—history—has meaning. The depth and intensity of such hope is brought to articulation in the various expressions of the eschatological hope. As Paul puts it: “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). Within this realization hope springs eternal.