

The size and the scope of the procession rival any parade New York has ever seen. Jewels and servants and animals, clothes and spices. Palm branches are set on the path and confetti rains through the air. All the spoils of war are trod down the streets of the city while the crowds lined on the sides shout your name. You are the one returning victorious, you are the triumphant general who led your people to victory. Everything that is happening now is because of how great you are! And as you are carried up and down the city streets, as you bask in the glory and acclamation of the crowds, as you are lifted up by the adrenaline of everyone chanting your name...a small, old voice behind you whispers in your ear...

"Memento mori."

"Remember, you are mortal."

Such was the practice in the height of the Roman Empire. As the Caesar or general was praised by the populace, a man was appointed to whisper in the ear, anchoring him during these events, ensuring that his ego did not run away with him. No matter how grand the procession, no matter how loud the people shouted, no matter how far the Empire spread, in the end the man being praised would still die. An important perspective to remember, perhaps most especially in the moment of triumph, when a man would feel on top of the world and utterly invincible. To remember that all this will end someday, that this earthly life will not last forever.

We may not be generals or royalty, but sometimes I think that just about everyone would benefit from this voice behind them. After all, we have a natural tendency to become obsessed with our day to day lives, don't we? The daily grind, the monthly or yearly plan of how we're going to get ahead and build up this life. But we pursue that goal of earthly glory, as small as it may be, so recklessly sometimes that we forget we are mortal. And in the end all of it will come to nothing. Perhaps such a regular reminder would help us to make wiser choices, to prioritize our lives better.

Certainly, as Christians, we are not unaware of this fact. After all, it is the gripping fear of our own mortality that brought us to Christ in the first place. By nature we try to ignore this truth that we are mortal. We drown it out in the things of this world to try to forget it. Because on our own we cannot face it. The death that waits for us is a terrible curse, something we cannot outrun or avoid in the end. We can struggle to put it off, but it will come for us like it has inevitably come for everyone. And lurking on the other side of that dark enemy of death is the one thing we cannot bear to face, the one thing we by nature know and try to forget. That we must answer for our lives here. Our lives that we know are not good enough. The very reason death comes for us...because we are sinners. On the other side of that unknown is the punishment, when we will be held accountable for what we have done.

But until we look at that gaping maw and truly accept that we are mortal, that we must die and can do nothing about it, until we recognize the hopelessness of our situation, we cannot be rescued from it. If we ignore the problem, we only doom ourselves, but when we see that we must die and cannot change that, then there is hope. Because then we look for a solution. Then we are ready to hear that there is salvation from this fate. Not from ourselves, of course, that much is obvious, but from outside ourselves.

From Christ. This is the gospel message we need. The good news. "Good" hardly does it justice, but is there a word in English that could capture what this means for us? That God himself became like us, that he gave up everything he had and all that he is to endure what was coming for us so that you wouldn't need to. There was the foe on the horizon, bearing down on you with unavoidable death, with eternal suffering to follow, and God stepped between us and the enemy. God endured the enemy and after he had suffered in your place he declared, "It is finished." He died. But he came back. He came back to show that as he was raised to life so will you be as well. Death will not hold you because it could not hold him. The enemy is defeated. Your mortality is not a problem any longer.

You are no longer part of a hollow procession through this life that will end with your death. You are not trapped in the brief glitz and glamour of this time. You needn't have someone reminding you that all this around us will end because that is not your life any longer. Instead you are part of a grander and more glorious procession, like the one the Apostle Paul describes in our reading today, **"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."** (2:14-16).

The gospel of Christ has been marching on a grand procession since its beginning. It marches through history and where it goes, it causes victory. It always has an effect, it always accomplishes what God desires. And we can look back and see its march, see the impact it has had as it travelled through time and the lands. And you are part of that grand and glorious procession. You are part of the victory parade. Not as a captive or slave in the train, but as one of the victorious.

A grand procession that has no end, one that will endure forever. One that doesn't need someone whispering to us, reminding us of our mortality because the point of the parade is that our mortality has been overcome. The gospel has released us from our fear of death and with Christ the victor at the center of the celebration, we know that we too will live forever with him. We share his victory because he gives it to us freely!

Of course, it takes the eyes of faith to recognize this victory parade. To the world and sometimes to ourselves we are anything but. Take a look at the Apostle Paul when he wrote this letter. His earthly journeys weren't parades and glory. He brought the message of eternal life and salvation with him, he was part of the glorious gospel procession. But the towns didn't show up in droves to shout his name and welcome him for what he brought. Often he was rejected and driven out of town. He was arrested, beaten, held prisoner, stoned, lashed and all for the sake of trying to help people. And yet he declares that we are always led in a triumphal procession in Christ.

Our lives perhaps might feel like some of the same, right? Our time here fluctuates between happiness and difficulty, but we seem to define our lives by the troubles, it's those we seem to remember more. No matter how hard we struggle, bad things continue to happen to us. And that's just the random things out of our control. What about the things we have to give up to stay in line with the gospel? The fun times we have to deny ourselves to give God the glory instead? The stuff we could have if we didn't have to be honest all the time? The glitz and glamour of the earthly parade calls out to us to join their procession. There'd be more to enjoy and less suffering to endure if only we gave up this tiresome and bleak walk with God and came over to where all the fun is.

It is perhaps at those times when we despair that we need a voice to whisper in our ear as well. When all we can see is the drudgery that the gospel causes for us and all that we give up by not joining the world's path. It is then we could have someone remind us, "Remember, you are eternal." Perhaps not the most accurate statement, after all, unlike the eternal God we did have a beginning. But it does drive home the point and the contrast to our former state of being mortal. We are eternal in that we will not end. In our God we will go on forever. Looking past the short time here we can see that what we endure now will not last. What we are tempted to give up our God for is so transitory that it hardly matters. When suffering comes, or temptation calls, we can remember this. We are above such concerns, we are beyond them, because we will outlast them all in our God.

And the proof of this victory is right here in front of you. In fact, it is you. What makes the procession of the gospel glorious, what shows its power and its victory is believers. The path of the gospel is carved out with those that the gospel message saves. That is the fruit of its labor, and that is the miracle of its victory. You should not be here this morning. You should not want to be here. Ever since Adam and Eve desired to be like God, that has been the default setting of the human heart. Ego. Pride. Wanting to be in control, be God. The idea that you would surrender yourself to another being, that you would give up control of your life to someone else is absolutely abhorrent to the natural self.

You shouldn't love God. You should hate God for telling you how to live your life. You should hate God for judging you. You should chafe under any direction he gives and his audacity to tell you what you can or can't have in your life. But you are here. You are here because you have rejected the world and love your Lord. Not because you changed your mind, not because you chose to, not because you overcame your hatred, but because God did it all for you through the power of the gospel. He changed your heart and caused you to trust him. That is the victory of the gospel, the victory and the proof evident in you today. As Paul said to the Corinthians when they wanted proof of his apostleship, **"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."** (3:2,3).

We are the victory parade for Christ. The fact that we are here, that we love our God, that by his power we choose him over the world is the proof of the gospel's power. It is the proof of the victory by our God over our own death. It is the proof that we are victorious with him and with all who have joined the procession of the triumphant led by the gospel message, by the living word of God, Jesus Christ. The one who was dead but behold is alive forever and ever. That is our triumph that will last forever.

As we bask in the glory that God has shared with us in this parade, as we enjoy the shouts of all the saints and angels who sing the victory of our God with us, we do not need a voice to call us back down to earth, to remind us that this will end, to stop us from getting a big head, because there is no end to this victory. Instead, the voice can cheerfully announce, "Remember, in Christ you are eternal!" Amen.