

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
APRIL 3, 2022**

HEBREWS 6: 13-20

“CHRIST LEADS US THROUGH DEATH”

Imagine you're on vacation in Florida, just relaxing on the beach in your lounge chair. It's a perfect day---warm, blue skies, the waves are calm, not a worry in the world. You think to yourself---“Life is peaceful and good. So stable, so relaxing, not a worry in the world.” Then a friend sits down and says, “I've been doing some interesting reading about astronomy. Guess what I just found out---we are moving fast! The earth orbits the sun at the speed of 67,000 miles per hour! And our whole galaxy is flying through the universe at the speed of 1.3 million miles per hour!” You clutch your lounge chair so as to not be thrown off and think to yourself---“Whoa! Hang on! How can I survive a trip like that!” (in “Our Daily Bread”, 6/23/01)

Our seemingly stable planet is actually moving at incomprehensible speed! And our lives are moving fast, too. Does everything in your own life happen to seem stable and calm right now? Hang on! Your life is moving fast----- racing right along towards its end: death.

Scary! Thinking about that fact---what we are rapidly heading towards--- can cause fear. There is a proper type of fear of death---which urges us to get ready for the end of our trip in this world. But there is also an *improper* fear of death. That not good type of fear of death can cause us anxiety, hopelessness, panic----that kind of fear of death can be worse than death itself.

This not good type of fear of death often leads people to put security first in life, thinking that wealth, popularity, power, good health will somehow protect us from death. But you can be as secure and “safe” as you want---you will end up dead anyway!

William the Conqueror is one of the most famous kings of all time---he conquered England in 1066 A.D. He was incredibly wealthy, famous, and powerful---he had it all. Guess what? He died anyway. All his fame and wealth and power couldn't prevent that. And all of that didn't even help him after death either----what a funeral he had! His funeral got delayed due to some political maneuvering after he died. During those few days of delay, his corpse started decomposing and bloating up. Finally, on his funeral day there were problems. He was to be buried in a crypt right in the church building.

When the clergymen tried to place his body in the crypt it was hard to fit it in because of the bloating. They had to push and pull and force the corpse in---and it exploded. The fumes released were just horrible! The whole congregation started getting sick and ran out the door. The bishops and priests couldn't leave---they had to finish the funeral which was almost over. They burned a record breaking amount of incense, they prayed and chanted at high speed, said the last "Amen" and ran for the exit! (The Norman Conquest, Marc Morris, Hutchinson Press, 2012, p. 331)

All respect and honor for the king was gone. But what did it matter anymore? And what could William do about it? After all, he was dead. Acquire all the power, fame, and wealth you wish---it won't matter a bit when your day of death arrives.....and it's coming fast.

An unhealthy type of fear of death can really mess us up, it can shake our faith. So how can we get over it? *By becoming willing to die.* Think about the millions of martyrs for Christ in our Orthodox Church's 2000 year history. They faced death at the hands of the Romans, the Muslims, the Communists, etc. And they faced their deaths with joy. They were willing and even happy to die for Jesus Christ. There are many stories of martyrs being led to execution--- being taken to face the lions, or the sword, or the machine guns---and rejoicing, not weeping and moaning. Singing joyful hymns as death drew near---like St. Paul in the jail at Philippi.

Why? Because they knew a great truth. A truth that St. Paul tells us in today's epistle reading from Hebrews 6. That truth is that someone has gone before us through death to the other side. And, by doing so, He has prepared the way for us. As we heard read today in Hebrews 6: 19-20----"We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf."

Jesus is our "forerunner" who has gone ahead of us through death Himself on the cross. He died, He went through death ahead of us. He leads the way for us through death to life and resurrection on the other side.

The term St. Paul uses for this is "forerunner"----someone who runs ahead of us and clears the path for us. My dog, Izzie, and I like to go hiking in the back areas of the massive Metro Parks. We go off the trails and paths into the deep woods where people are rarely seen. Sometimes it's tough going, but that's the fun. But Izzie doesn't like thorns. And sometimes when you're deep in the woods you can't keep going without going through some thorns. So what I have to do is be her "forerunner". I have to pull the thorn branches out of her way to let her through. My dog needs a forerunner---I'm it!

We all need a forerunner when we die. That's who Jesus Christ is. He clears away the thorns, He prepares a path for us through death to the life beyond.

So there is no reason for we Christians to have an unhealthy type of fear of death. No reason for anxiety about how to somehow avoid death... Why worry? Our forerunner Jesus has already gone ahead of us and will lead us through to the other side.

But it must be said that there is a healthy and *good* kind of fear of death. This is a fear of not being ready for that day which is coming to us. That fear hopefully leads us to get ready!

It is good to often think about our own personal day of death. We should always remember that we will die. It is good to remember that and to ponder that. St. Isaac of Syria wrote these words about 1500 years ago---"Blessed is the man who remembers that he will leave this life." (in Life After Death, Metropolitan Hierotheos, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, p. 374)

Remember you will die. Think about that day. And, think about what will happen *after* your death.

Once a man was chatting with a high school student and asked him, "What will you do after you graduate?" The student answered, "I'll go to college." "And after you graduate from college?" "I'll go to law school." "And after law school?" "I'll become a lawyer, hopefully a very successful one?" "And after that?" "I plan to be a judge." "And after that?" "After a long and successful career, I will retire." "And after that?" "I hope to enjoy many years of retirement and travel all over the world." "And after that?" The young fellow hesitated and said, "Well, I guess after that I will die" "And after that?" Again, some hesitation and then the youth said, "You know, I have never thought about that before.....". (Father Anthony Coniaris, Eastern Orthodoxy: A Way of Life, Light & Life Publishing, p. 78)

We should all think seriously about what will happen to us after death, because we will all arrive one day at that point. We should remember it, we should repent of our sins, we should get ready----because we never know when we will arrive at that point. Maybe far in the future, maybe very soon.

And if we get ready now---by living in Christ, by living seriously for Christ---then we can face that future day with joy, because we know that Christ has gone through death before us. He has prepared the way for us to go through.

In our epistle lesson today, St. Paul told us in Hebrews 6:20 that "Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf." Our Lord Jesus Christ has already gone

through death and has prepared a way through for us. He will lead us home.
Let us live our lives for Him in such a way as to be ready for the trip.