"Time is short, eternity is long."

JHN: Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine

As we draw, once again, towards the end of the Church's year, and our thoughts are focused on those who have died and have gone before us, and the Holy Souls in Purgatory, we do well, perhaps, to think about our own last end and what death means.

It is not unnatural to shy away from such thoughts. Who, after all, wants to spend time thinking about their own death? And yet, death – even more than taxation – is the one thing that is certain, and sooner or later we will all have to face the death of loved ones and, indeed, our own parting from this world.

And in any case, our leaving this world is the whole point of our being here in the first place. We were created, and given life, in order to live well and pass on to life with God in heaven. Our whole life in this world is a preparation for the life to come. We were made to know, love, and serve God here below, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven. In other words, we were created precisely in order to dwell in the presence of God for all eternity.

But getting to heaven is not a natural consequence of having been born. It does not follow automatically that just because someone dies he will inevitably pass into heaven. We are so used to the idea that God is 'nice' that we have started to assume that He will never turn anyone away from everlasting life, but that's not what Our Lord says in the Gospels. Again and again, He warns us that we have to be in a fit state to enter into heaven: 'Not everyone that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he shall enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 7:21). And we remember the gate-crasher who tried to enter the marriage feast without the proper

wedding garment and who, as a result, had his hands and feet bound, and was cast into the outer darkness (Mt 22:11-13).

All of this may sound harsh to our over-sensitive twenty-first century ears, but God has always – from the beginning – made it clear that there are certain requirements placed upon those who would enter into heaven after this life is done, and whilst being kind to others goes a very long way to fulfil those requirements yet, on its own, kindness is not enough. We are required to have faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ and to act on that faith, both in our worship of the living God as well as in our service of those whom He has created in His image and likeness.

All the saints, whose feast day we celebrated last Sunday, were so aware of this truth that many of them kept a reminder of their own mortality constantly before them. For example, many would keep a skull on their desks or at their prayer stations, to remind them that death is precisely what life is about. Ordinary Catholics have long been encouraged to pray daily for a good death, by which we mean that when we come to die we are already in a state of grace, and have a priest come to our death bed to administer the Last Rites to assist us in the final stage of our journey to heaven.

We do well often to call to mind the Four Last Things – Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven – and to remind ourselves that we will, without a shadow of a doubt, encounter three of those four… but which three depends on how we live our lives now!

The great patron of a happy death is St Joseph. He who died in the arms of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of Our Lord Himself sets for us a model of what it means to live piously and to die in holiness. St Joseph lived his whole life as a Just Man (Mt 1:19), that is, as someone who sought to do only the will of God in all things, loving his God and taking delight in God's company, and serving his Lord and Master, and his neighbour, with a humble and generous heart. He did what we are exhorted to do, namely to think upon the

beauty of heaven and to hold that beauty before our eyes throughout even – and especially – the darkest days of our life, in all our moments of trial and tribulation. For however hard life gets, we do well to remember the words of John Henry Newman, that 'time is short, eternity is long.' When we struggle to fast, or to do penance, or to offer up our aches and pains, and our disappointments, Newman – and indeed all the saints – urges us to consider that these things last but a while, whereas heaven lasts for all eternity, and the joy and peace of what we will encounter there is well worth the cost of what we must suffer here.

No one can come to the Father except by way of conforming himself to Christ crucified: by living and dying as Christ lived and died. But if we do *that* in this life, then – and only then – can we rise again with Him to eternal glory in the next.