

ENDLESSNESS

The memorial discourse of Joseph W. Mathews

at the celebration of the death of his son,

John Donaldson Mathews

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I probably do not have to acknowledge in this company that for about three years I have been under something like the doom of death. Little did I suppose that that would come to fruition in the death of my son John. As a memorial to him, I want to talk a little and offer the memorial I promised God I would give a year from the day Betty Glassner died: that in some way or another I would be responsible to see that we found a way to articulate to ourselves what endlessness means, or, to use the traditional category, what immortality would mean in the postmodern world.

So I thought this would be a memorial to Betty too. But then it occurred to me that on the march, up to this moment, six of us have died. The first one (I am going to call them brother and sister) was Brother Warren, infant child of Don Warren, and then was Sister Hockley, and the next was Brother Emig, and the next was Sister Glassner, and the next was Sister Greene, and the most recent was John.

Now I have tried recently to bring into focus the last category in the other world chart, "Endlessness." I have been more and more convinced that actually there are sixtyfour lectures and not sixteen. I am not sure that I am going to be ready for several months to get inside and spin it outward the way it ought to be, but I thought perhaps I might now, for the sake of clarity for myself, just deal abstractly and intellectually with it to try to get the target located. But I sense that all of us know more about this from the inside than at the moment we know that we know.

Living in the postmodern world as a onestory universe -- and you have to put your foot down hard here or you get lost -- we know and acknowledge in gratitude to God that when you die, you die dead. There are no ifs, ands, maybes, or buts; you are dead. You do not even raise that kind of question. That is part of having lost any upper story of the universe. Death is death.

But the next thing you have to begin to work with is the transparency within the one world that you have left. It is within the transparency that you are going to find the reality which you are searching for when you use a category like immortality. In beginning to try to look through humanness, it is pretty obvious to us and to any man, although he may not have the name that what happens is that the Mystery comes or, in terms of your interior being, the awe. You are located, as you begin to try to think about this, over against the Mystery, which you are aware of only in and through frightening dread and scintillating compulsion at the same time.

Once situated there, as I look back, the first big "think" that comes is something we have talked about many times. A man never finally lives his life until he lives his death. That is to say, John is now one step beyond me. I have yet to experience the unbelievable, wonderfilled dread and fascination which is the experience of death, and until a person has, he is not fully human. If you

bracket everything else and think only of this, at this moment when you look through the transparency, John is now more human than his aged father. I think that is probably the first awareness that comes.

The next one, as again I go back, is the awareness that life is as mysterious as death. It is pretty clear that anybody who says he knows anything about the dark domain of death, except that it is death, is selfdeceived. Death comes at you as just sheer mystery. You do not have to do a doubletake. If you are looking through to the center of things, there is just sheer mystery. But you have to do a doubletake to grasp the fact that life is just as mysterious as death. If somebody would ask me to say what life is, finally I would be as hard put as to say what death is, except for one thing which I will get to in a moment. I do not know what life is. It is exactly as mysterious as death. It is exactly as wonderfilled, both with dread and fascination, as death is itself.

The exception I mentioned earlier is that if somebody asked me what life is all about, I could easily rattle it off. Life is mystery, life is freedom, life is love, and life is fulfillment. The interesting thing is that if somebody would ask me to say what death is all about, I could do it. Death is all about mystery, and freedom, and love, and fulfillment. That is what you mean when you say, as Saint Francis did long ago, Brother Life, or is it Sister Life? I do not know which, and Brother Death, or is it Sister Death? That is, you are in exactly the same hands, in the hands of the same final reality, in life as in death.

When you get pretty clear about that, then I think you are ready for the transparency to become transparent. I do not quite know how to say this yet, and I have to start something like this rather slowly. As you live in the Land of Mystery (this was true long before we had the categories), and the River of Consciousness, and on top of or down underneath I do not know which the Mountain of Care, and since you have waltzed on the Sea of Tranquillity, you have become increasingly aware that you are your being. When this becomes intensified (I do not know whether it is sudden although the last jar of it I think is sudden), you become aware that you are simply the rolledup ball of all the awe you have been. This is what you are.

Here you bracket the metaphysical questions and do not even raise the question of immortality, whether grossly or subtly in relationship to man's attempt to define himself, whether it be with the ancient pharaohs who were going to maintain the human drive of immortality by building pyramids that nothing could wipe away, or whether it be the more subtle and more crude personalistic philosophy of foreverness as the continuation of personal existence. You can even remember hearing people say, "If there is not a continuation of myself on my basis in death I will have none of it." That is crude. You wipe that out.

You are dealing with states of being. You are dealing with the phenomenal in life that brackets the metaphysical, that brackets a rational explanation of the numinal. (I am on a bit of a tangent now, but not too much.) And when you see that, then you become aware that when a word like immortality, or endlessness, broke into history, it broke into history as a phenomenological state, as a state of being. Men became aware of endlessness. That is what you are trying to break through on when you say that you experience yourself as being.

But you can only understand that if you put it negatively. No longer are you aware of yourself as living. No longer are you aware of yourself as dying. You are aware only of your being. You people from India will have some understanding of this. That is to say, in the other world I am no more alive, and I am no more dead. Categories of living and dying do not apply to the other world. There are only categories of being.

I was very irritated with the verse of the song "Come and go with me to that land" which said, "There is dying in that land." There is not any dying there! But what I was not bright enough to see was that the song was theologically incorrect even beyond that verse. Another verse said, "There is living in that land." Well, there is not any living there! In the other world there is only being. Therefore, the rubrics of life and death have no significance. Only the rubrics of being have any significance. There is only being there.

This is what Saint John means when he talks about eternal life. Eternal life is not something that is going to happen after you die; it is not something that is going to happen before you die. It is the eternal moment which is beyond the rubrics of both the living and the dying. In the other world there is only being.

It is only when you get that far that you can even begin to understand what Kazantzakis means when he talks about "Saviors of God." Oh, that is offensive to anybody who is sensitive. It is extremely offensive to me. Did you ever think you are a savior of God? In this experience, when you grasp that you are beyond life and death, in this terrorfilled awareness, you know that the mystery, which is being itself, has no opportunity to be except through your being. Now, you think, God is finally present in this world, not through sticks and stones, although your being touches sticks and stones. The Aboriginal people in Australia and the African people long ago understood this, although they had no words for it. God and if this sounds next to sacrilegious to you, that is the way it should sound or Being is dependent upon my being. And although you never lose the sense of your own distinct being, you know there is no being without your being. And, since everything but being itself, the mystery, is contingent and temporal, that means that my being is everlasting. And, if I may put it into poetry, God and I in this state come to terms with one another. It is as though I were to say, "God, I will be your being, in my living and dying. I will be your being." And God says, "All right, all right, and I will let you participate in my endlessness." Do you hear that?

This is why Sartre's play No Exit is quite different than if you were going to write the play that I was writing here today. There are mirrors there, but in this play when you look in the mirror, you see the face of the Son of Man. Lela Mosley, that means that you and I and John up there, in heaven, all are going to look somewhat alike.