

**August 8, 2004**

**Tenth Sunday After Pentecost**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is a commonplace of simple wisdom that "you can't take it with you when you go." This popular axiom, usually cited as an exhortation to detachment from material things, is also supported in Holy Scripture, where it is said of both the wise man and the fool that they "perish and leave their wealth to others" (Psalm 49 [48]:10). No matter what a man has accumulated in his lifetime, wrote Ben Sirach, the time must come when "he must leave these things to others, and die" (Ecclesiasticus 11:19)

Even though we take that proposition as self-evident, apparently not everyone in antiquity thought so. Tut-ankh-amen, for example, notwithstanding his reputation for wisdom in the fourteenth century before Christ, evidently imagined he could take at least some of it with him when he went. Indeed, a rather large museum exhibit now contains the art works, household items, and other amenities that the old pharaoh carried off to his regal tomb.

Nonetheless, the plain fact that archeology was able to recover those sundry treasures from Tut-ankh-amen's tomb is pretty good evidence that even he was unsuccessful in taking the stuff with him.

Although the reminder that "you can't take it with you when you go" normally carries about it a negative and ascetical ring, it could just as well be heard in a positive and supportive way. For instance, if we simply turn the statement around and say, "You have to leave it here," it is at once obvious that this principle of detachment is also a principle of history and culture.

Suppose for a moment that Tut-ankh-amen really had been able to take everything with him when he went. Imagine, indeed, that all the ancient pharaohs took with them, when they went, not only their art works and household items, but also the very pyramids that they had spent their lifetimes constructing. What would we now know about Egyptian history and culture?

Suppose, in addition, that Ictinus, Callicrates, and Phidias had been permitted to carry the Parthenon away with them when they took their leave. The Acropolis would look as bare as it probably did before the Greeks arrived.

Imagine too that Socrates, when he swallowed the fatal hemlock, swallowed also—and forever—those ideas that he had just propounded to Plato and the other friends surrounding him, the very ideas that have formed the mind of Western man for more than two millennia. Worthily may God be praised that Socrates could not take the ideas with him when he went.

Thus the thesis that "you can't take it with you when you go" may be heard as a gospel of sorts. It is good news, not bad. Truly, history and the transmission of human culture are founded on the principle that "you can't take it with you when you go."

Indeed, even if the Almighty had not so decreed, human wisdom itself would certainly have made a rule about it.

For instance, even without a divine mandate on the subject, the contemporaries of the Florentine poet would have told him, "All right, Dante, you may die, if you feel so strongly about it, but please understand that the **Divine Comedy** stays here. Don't even think about taking it with you." The British Parliament, likewise, would have determined that Shakespeare might be given permission to emigrate to the afterlife, but only with the proviso that Othello and Hamlet could not accompany him on the journey.

Tut-ankh-amen was not the last person to try and take it with him when he went. When Vergil died at Brindisi in Calabria on September 22, 19 BC, his **Aeneid** was not yet ready for publication, and he had left instructions with his literary executors to burn the manuscript in the event of his death. Vergil, that is to say, endeavored to take the work with him when he went.

Fortunately, Caesar Augustus would have none of it. Convinced that Vergil's great epic version of the Trojan origin of the Roman people would inspire them to an heroic sense of their destiny, finding thus their rightful place in history, Augustus ordered Vergil's wishes to be ignored and his work to be published. He was correct, and the **Aeneid** became a standard text in the teaching of Latin grammar and literature for the rest of time.

It is good news, not bad, that a man must take leave of what he makes. We must not try to keep together what the Almighty's wise decree had determined to put asunder.

©2004 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)