A Lenten reflection

Meditation on Death
Chapter 23 of “The Imitation of Christ”
By Thomas á Kempis (d. A.D. 1471)

Very soon the end of your life will be at hand: consider, therefore, the state of your soul. Today a man is here; tomorrow he is gone. (I Maccabeus 2:63) And when he is out of sight, he is soon out of mind. Oh, how dull and hard is the heart of man, which thinks only of the present, and does not provide against the future! You should order your every deed and thought, as though today were the day of your death. Had you a good conscience, death would hold no terrors for you; (Luke 12:37) even so, it were better to avoid sin than to escape death. (Wisdom 4:16) If you are not ready to die today, will tomorrow find you better prepared? (Matthew 24:44) Tomorrow is uncertain; and how can you be sure of tomorrow? Of what use is a long life, if we amend so little? Alas, a long life often adds to our sins rather than to our virtue!

Would to God that we might spend a single day really well! Many recount the years since their conversion, but their lives show little sign of improvement. If it is dreadful to die, it is perhaps more dangerous to live long. Blessed is the man who keeps the hour of his death always in mind, and daily prepares himself to die. If you have ever seen anyone die, remember that you, too, must travel the same road. (Hebrews 9:27)

Each morning remember that you may not live until evening; and in the evening, do not presume to promise yourself another day. Be ready at all times, (Luke 21:36) and so
live that death may never find you unprepared. Many die suddenly and unexpectedly; for at an hour that we do not know the Son of Man will come. (Matthew 24:44) When your last hour strikes, you will begin to think very differently of your past life, and grieve deeply that you have been so careless and remiss.

Happy and wise is he who endeavors to be during his life as he wishes to be found at his death. For these things will afford us sure hope of a happy death; perfect contempt of the world; fervent desire to grow in holiness; love of discipline; the practice of penance; ready obedience; self-denial; the bearing of every trial for the love of Christ. While you enjoy health, you can do much good; but when sickness comes, little can be done. Few are made better by sickness, and those who make frequent pilgrimages seldom acquire holiness by so doing.

Do not rely on friends and neighbors, and do not delay the salvation of your soul to some future date, for men will forget you sooner than you think. It is better to make timely provision and to acquire merit in this life, than to depend on the help of others. And if you have no care for your own soul, who will have care for you in time to come? The present time is most precious; now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2) It is sad that you do not employ your time better, when you may win eternal life hereafter. The time will come when you will long for one day or one hour in which to amend; and who knows whether it will be granted?

Dear soul, from what peril and fear you could free yourself, if you lived in holy fear, mindful of your death. Apply yourself so to live now, that at the hour of death, you may be glad and unafraid. Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ. (Romans 6:8) Learn now to despise all earthly things, that you may go freely to Christ. Discipline your body now by penance, that you may enjoy a sure hope of salvation.

Foolish man, how can you promise yourself a long life, when you are not certain of a single day? (Luke 12:20) How many have deceived themselves in this way, and been
snatched unexpectedly from life! You have often heard how this man was slain by the sword; another drowned; how another fell from a high place and broke his neck; how another died at table how another met his end in play. One perishes by fire, another by the sword, another from disease, another at the hands of robbers. Death is the end of all men (Ecclesiastics 7:2) and the life of man passes away suddenly as a shadow. (Psalm 38:7; 143:4)

Who will remember you when you are dead? Who will pray for you? Act now, dear soul; do all you can; for you know neither the hour of your death, nor your state after death. While you have time, gather the riches of everlasting life. (Luke 12:33; Galatians 6:8) Think only of your salvation, and care only for the things of God. Make friends now, by honoring the Saints of God and by following their example, that when this life is over, they may welcome you to your eternal home. (Luke 16:9)

Keep yourself a stranger and pilgrim upon earth, (I Peter 2:11), to whom the affairs of this world are of no concern. Keep your heart free and lifted up to God, for here you have no abiding city. (Hebrews 13:14) Daily direct your prayers and longings to Heaven, that at your death your soul may merit to pass joyfully into the presence of God.

*May God bless you during this Lenten season and all throughout the year.*