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"Happy Birthday"

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“Happy Birthday”

It is a kindness to remember someone’s birthday, and to give a call or to send a card to one of our acquaintances, friends or family members. And in so doing, we also benefit. If we celebrate the birthday of a historical person or of someone who has died, we might not be doing a kindness to him or to her, but we gain something of value for ourselves. Finally, if we celebrate our own birthday with one or more persons, we also achieve something in addition to whatever we receive from others.

What might we receive by celebrating birthdays? We might enjoy making a joke about the age of another person, but surely that is not in itself worth the price of a card. When we take even a moment to recall the gift of life as it is manifested in another person, including those who have died, we cannot help but re-value our own life. Birth is the beginning of life for us, and when we celebrate the mystery of someone else’s entering upon the experience of human life, we remind ourselves of how important it is to be alive. Compared to the most extravagant birthday gift that one person can give to another, life is incomparably greater. When we give a birthday greeting, we attend in some small to that which is of most value – life.

While we might think of how a birthday-person has gotten older, and has changed over time, we might reflect on ourselves, and how we too never grow younger, but neither do we only add to the number of our years – we become ever more that person whose life began at a specific moment in time, with the capacity for continuing to live without end. We might become aware, as we consider someone else’s birth, of the innate sense we have that human life, once begun, is oriented towards continuation, even through the experience of death.

Remembering the birthday of some historical person – a good leader, a saint, or a relative – provides us with an opportunity for recognizing particular values and qualities that we value in them, and so desire for ourselves. These persons we recall still affect us positively, even if we cannot find words to express exactly how or in what ways their influence is beneficial. The humanity of those we respect guide our imaginations and desires in responding to challenges with courage, to loving rather than hating, and to treating life as a holy mystery. Many of us have found that our friendship continues and even grows with those whose births we choose to celebrate, though they have passed through death. Friends help one another. “Saints” is a name for people who have died, and are known to continue being helpful friends.

Celebrating our own birthdays is important. If we have at times avoided the occasion, perhaps our attention was focused primarily on the passage of time considered as a loss or diminishment. Another option moves in an entirely different direction: our birthdays are not primarily about us as "owners" of a body that is ageing, but about a supreme personal gift from God that leads to praise and gratitude. Each of us is not only the fruit of human love, but a unique creation, cherished by God, sought after for eternal companionship. Ours is the highest calling imaginable: no matter our age, health, past accomplishments and failures, we were born into life with the option of never-ending friendship with God. That is worth celebrating.

God is alive, and desires us to live in gratitude for the gift of life that we and others now experience or have experienced. Those who are grateful for being born into human life are those who, in a natural progression, will continue in gratitude and in praise of God in the life that continues after death. "Happy Birthday."