

5th Sunday of Lent 2008

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Have you been to any good funerals lately? Yes, I know that sounds like a strange question. We're used to hearing questions about life and not death. Have you been to any good movies lately, restaurants, parties, sports events, etc. Have you been to any good funerals lately? As strange as it may seem, I think you have a sense of what I mean, especially if you're Catholic. The Catholic Church does funerals well, for the most part. In the midst of the grief, the loss, the mourning, our church provides us with a ritual that creates a space for mourning and meaning. Mourning and Meaning. That's what makes a "good" funeral.

I attended a "Good funeral" the other day. Fr. Bill Campbell, whom many of you know, presided over the funeral for his step-mother Maryclare who had died after a relatively short struggle with cancer. It wasn't just Bill's words that evoked laughter and tears as he spoke of the life of his "second" mother that made this a "good" funeral. Nor was it just Maryclare's poignant words that were read after communion that spoke of her gratefulness for her life, her loves and friendships. It wasn't the prayers of the assembly in memory of Maryclare and the hope for her share in eternal life. It wasn't the plaintive sounds of a saxophone playing the hymn tune from Jupiter that had been used at Maryclare and Jim's wedding or the songs that we all sang. It wasn't the crowd of friends and family that gathered to mourn and celebrate one single human life. It wasn't all the ritual words and actions that try to make "sense" of the "senseless" experience of death, especially of someone whom we know and love. It was all of these ritual and personal elements that made this a "good" funeral, one where, despite the loss, the grief and pain, you left knowing that this single life lived in faithfulness with its' own heartaches and joys had ultimate meaning.

But there is so much more as Christians that makes a "good" funeral, the "best" we can hope for. Very simply, the story of the loved one who has died is intimately bound to the story of Jesus Christ, his life, death and rising from the dead. In the gospel we just heard Martha, Mary received the "best that they could hope for". Their friend, their beloved Jesus had restored their brother to life. Lazarus was with them again in flesh and blood. Can we even imagine what it would be like to be "in the tomb four days" and then come back to eat and drink and love and dance and sing and celebrate in this

world. It certainly sounds like the “best one could hope for”! But of course, in time Lazarus would die. He would also be witness to the excruciatingly painful death of his beloved friend Jesus. Maybe coming back was not the “best he could hope for”.

And what is the “best we can hope for” for ourselves and those we love knowing that death is a reality for us all? What we claim as disciples of Jesus is that our stories of love, of loss, of grief and mourning have meaning through Jesus’s story of love, of loss, of living and dying and being raised by the one who is Love itself.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth is a love story, the love that the Father has for him and he has for the Father. But it is the story of his human loves and friendships as well. The Gospel we have just heard reveals something of Jesus’ love for his friends as well as his love for the one whom he calls “Father”. We see this love in his tears and grief at the loss of his beloved friend, Lazarus. We see his love for Mary and Martha as he responds to their grief and loss at their beloved brother.

In this Gospel John portrays a very human Jesus who feels pain and loss but a Jesus in whom the divine presence is so alive that he is given the power to bring his friend back to life. This “raising of Lazarus” from the dead, bringing him back into life and relationship with those whom he loves presages Jesus’ own Resurrection. This raising of Lazarus is only a glimmer of what Jesus’ himself will experience, not as he is brought back to life but rather as Death itself is shattered through God’s faithfulness to him.

This is the power and the poignancy, the mourning and the meaning that we experience at a “good” funeral. We see the loved one’s life and our own lives woven into the tapestry of Jesus’ life and death and rising. Like Martha in the Gospel we profess that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, that our lives and our deaths have meaning because of his life. This is really Good News that we hear. It doesn’t diminish our pain at the loss of a loved one. It doesn’t diminish our wondering why life can be so unfair. Nor does it mask our pain and loss with some promise of ultimate resurrection. What it does do is let us see our lives taken up in the power and the glory of Jesus’ death and rising, not just in another time and place but even now in our present.

This is the “best” we can hope for, for ourselves and for our loved ones who have experienced death: to know that our lives are forever part of God’s love

story told so beautifully, so poignantly, so powerfully in the life of Jesus Christ.