

Commentary to the Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)



A patient asked Dr Karl Menninger what he should do if he felt a nervous breakdown coming on. He expected the famous psychiatrist to respond, "Call me immediately." Instead, he said, "Go out and find somebody in trouble and help that person."

I go to many funerals. It goes with the job. Often a dead man's friend gives a eulogy. Invariably he says, "We come here not to mourn a death but celebrate a life." I say to myself, "Buddy, if you're not mourning, you're in the wrong church." Jesus shed copious tears at Lazarus' tomb. He wasn't celebrating his life. One wag said, "Christ cried so loudly He woke Lazarus up."

This Gospel reveals much about the generosity of Lazarus and his sisters toward Jesus. He overnights with them often. He felt their home was His house. "Nuestra casa tu casa." There He could chill out.

They would summon Him to a lasagne and chianti supper after a nap. They would spend the evening playing Scrabble. Next day He would leave refreshed.

It could be said of this family what Wordsworth's friend said of him after his death, "Thou had for weary feet the gift of rest." We would do well to copy their style. In the Bethany family's case, the guest was the Christ. We shall have to be satisfied with a surrogate Christ. "Be not loath to entertain strangers," wrote Paul, "for thereby some have entertained Christ unawares."

Also, when Jesus received the sisters' messenger asking Him to return to Bethany, there was a price on His head. It would be unhealthy for Him to return behind enemy lines. Yet, He rolled up His sleeping bag and moved out of the mountain's safety.

Lazarus was in trouble. He would go to his side no matter the consequences to His person. He believed Woody Allen's dictum that showing up is two-thirds of life. This beau geste says much about the character of Christ. It tells us that we can expect the same consideration from Him also. It suggests He would have us help others in trouble. A sorrow shared, said Shakespeare, is a sorrow halved. You know now whose game plan Dr Menninger was following.

The Lazarus story informs us that the Savior hated death. His weeping is evidence of that. Jesus reveals to us that God is upset when nasty things happen to people whether saints or sinners.

Jesus is the God of life and not of death. He came to do battle with death and vanquish it. Ezekiel today tells us this welcome message from God. "I will open your graves and have you rise..."

If we comprehend the Lord with another mind-frame, then we are stuck with a faux Jesus. The genuine Christ longs for the hour when death will go belly up for each of us.

Check what Jesus says to Martha. "I am the resurrection and the life." The Galilean emphasizes He is the God of the living. Why do we keep saying over corpses lying in our middle aisles, "Eternal rest grant unto you." Is it not more correct to take our cue from this Gospel and say, "Eternal life grant unto you."? Jesus never said, "I am the resurrection and the rest."

If we think of Heaven as a place to collect bedsores, why not dress the dead in cheap pajamas from Wal-Mart rather than in expensive traveling clothes? Obviously Jesus thinks of Heaven as a place where we go to party hearty and look our best. To make Heaven otherwise is to make it dullsville. No wonder even the best of us are loath to quit this present existence. Who wants to go to a dull party that goes on for eternity?

Martha replies to Christ that she knows her brother will rise down the road. Jesus replies sharply, "I am the resurrection and the life." So, if Jesus becomes the mainstay of our lives, we can experience resurrection in the now and here. Who really wants to wait for a resurrection years away?

We say what Jesus did for Lazarus was super. Was it? In Heaven, every tear is wiped away and all pain removed. Why would Lazarus want to leave paradise and return to earth with all its problems? Furthermore, he would have to die again. Once is enough. I wager an angry Lazarus said to Jesus as he came out of the tomb, "With friends like you, who needs enemies?"

Jacqueline Kennedy, who unhappily for her was an authority on death, said, "The Catholic Church is at its best at the time of death. Its message is that death is not the putting out of light. It is rather turning off the lamp because the dawn has come."

Fr James Gilhooley