

Homecoming

- 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

- November 10, 2019

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The Catholic Church gets quite serious toward the end of the liturgical year. In three Sundays it will be the First Sunday of Advent. No walking on water, changing water into wine at a wedding, feeding five thousand, blessing children, healing the blind, lame, lepers, the deaf, the paralyzed, catching fish. The gospels get serious now about the last things: death, destruction of Jerusalem, judgment, and the definitive coming of the Kingdom on earth.

This is Homecoming Weekend. It does not sound like our readings are very suited to homecoming. But they are: the great homecoming, the only homecoming that really counts, our coming home to God beyond death in eternal life. The Maccabean brothers, while tortured to death, are filled with hope of being raised up. The Psalmist exclaims: “Lord, when your glory appears, my joy will be full”, and “I in justice shall behold your face; on waking I shall be content in your presence.” Jesus saying: “The dead will rise.” “Those deemed worthy (will) attain... the resurrection of the dead.” That is the real homecoming.

This may seem far away for most of us. But is it really? What is the only single thing that is certain about the future of any of us whether we are 18 or whether we are 78? Health, maybe; love, marriage, friends, maybe; success, happiness, good fortune, maybe; long life, maybe; illness, old age, maybe. Only one thing for sure is certain for each and all of us... death. We don't need to think about it; but we should not deny it.

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, in a world in which death was so much more present than now, when so many did not live to five years old, or people died so quickly from unknown causes, the message of Christianity that swept powerfully across the Mediterranean and won the day, won the hearts of people, was “as Jesus has been raised from the dead, so too we who believe in him shall be raised up with him in our bodies and shall be transformed into his glorious body.”

That was the message that won the day for Christianity, that death, though certain, did not have the last word but rather our homecoming to God in our true selves, in consciousness and personality, in our bodies transformed into incorruptibility. We should never forget the fundamental principle that the human person is real in their humanity in proportion to their closeness in relationship to God. We are real now in our humanity because we are created in the image and likeness of God and—whether we know it or not, like it or not—are in relationship to God, the source of life. In our homecoming to God, when our relationship to God will be the fullness of our life and joy, we will be more real as the conscious, unique persons we will be; more, not less, real than we are now. We need to completely dump in the deep blue sea those trivialized images of heaven with clouds and angels or some vague afterlife of ephemeral immortal souls. That is not the message of Christianity. That is not what the bodily resurrection of Jesus guarantees, that is not our homecoming.

The message of Christianity has been weakened, has lost its power, in our era because we have been scolded out of focusing on and hoping for the afterlife, seeking the face of God by the idea that somehow doing so would keep us from caring for one another, seeking justice, preparing for the earthly Kingdom given by God. The truth is that after-life seekers have done more for humanity than the unbelieving or the indifferent. After-life seeking Christians have been free to do more in care for all peoples, especially the most vulnerable, to spend themselves more fully in love of others in this world, because they have nothing to lose with the guarantee in the Risen Jesus of life with God, rather than having to hold back their life now as if it were the only life there is. The message of Christianity has lost its power in our era also because in hundreds of ways we live in a death-denying, death-ignoring culture which tries to tell us we are okay in ourselves, that we can make ourselves okay, that we possess our life in ourselves and that we are not dependent—as we are—for our very existence on God.

Perhaps we don't look forward to, eagerly strain toward, life in the Risen Christ with God because we have weakened, attenuated, dehumanized that future life by making it some bodiless existence in which we lose our consciousness and personhood and human concreteness. The simple truth is that we will be more real then than we are now. We are meant for God and we will be more real, more our true selves, when we are in full relation, in union, with God. It is more than okay to seek this, to want this, to strain toward this. It is not selfish to do so because it is what God created us for and wants to give us. It is God's will, not just our own.

I told you that the Catholic Church gets serious in these last weeks of the liturgical year! And so have I! I am going to end with a poem, but not in order to ease off from, or soften, or lighten up on the seriousness. It may be the most honest poem I have ever read. It is by the English poet of the last century, Philip Larkin. He did not include it in his collected poems, perhaps because it is so honest and revealing about him. It was only published posthumously and not at his request. It's about Philip Larkin's fear of death, believing there is no life beyond, only extinction. Its darkness stimulates and calls for our light; its honesty requires the truth of our faith; its emptiness begs for the Risen Christ; its fear elicits our hope; its void of meaning empowers our truly seeking the face of God and full, bodily, true life with God. It is called "Aubade" which means "a poem greeting the dawn". "Aubade" by Philip Larkin.

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what's really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread
 Of dying, and being dead,
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
 —The good not done, the love not given, time
 Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
 An only life can take so long to climb
 Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;

But at the total emptiness for ever,
 The sure extinction that we travel to
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
 Not to be anywhere,
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
 Created to pretend we never die,
 And specious stuff that says *No rational being*
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
 That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
 Nothing to love or link with,
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
 That slows each impulse down to indecision.
 Most things may never happen: this one will,
 And realisation of it rages out
 In furnace-fear when we are caught without
 People or drink. Courage is no good:
 It means not scaring others. Being brave
 Lets no one off the grave.
 Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
 It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
 Have always known, know that we can't escape,
 Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
 Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
 In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
 Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
 The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
 Work has to be done.
 Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

Be as honest as Philip Larkin about death and you will know unforgettably the power and the bliss of Christian faith, the message of bodily resurrection in the Risen Jesus with God.