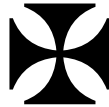


Introduction to the Liturgy

In the first Gospel, According To Mark, there is an encounter between Jesus and a very good young man. He tells Jesus honestly that he has kept the commandments, and that he sincerely wishes to enter into life. The evangelist tells us, *Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him*. Then he invites him to give up all his wealth, and to become a thirteenth apostle. He looks at the fishermen, shakes his head, and goes away sad. Jesus too is sad, and speaks of the hardship of the rich in entering the Kingdom. In the third Gospel (According To Luke) Jesus is dying beside a condemned criminal, who begs for his favour when he enters his Kingdom. Now the hardship has taken its ultimate form. Jesus turns to him and promises him, *Today you will be with me in Paradise*. Today in the Fourth Gospel we will see Jesus going to the grave, where one is buried whom he loved.



Homily

All through his life Jesus has been moving through the concerns which make up our lives, and within every situation that he meets he descends into the heart of their meaning. It is as if, for him, anything which impinges on the life of a human being is a kind of portal through which there is a way to ultimate things, to the sacred, to God. This is knowing Christ: wherever we find ourselves, if he is near us, we will find ourselves caught up into the meeting with God the Father which is his deepest, most natural mode of being.

You can, if you want, learn to do this for yourself. We have learnt from Jesus that God wants to encounter us, not by removing us from the world, into some safe place where we can enjoy a privileged and cloistered experience of the spiritual. There would have been little need for the Word to have become flesh for that to happen. God wants to become flesh for us, and to meet us in the torrential onslaught of our real life: timebound, pressured, caught in the maelstrom of the present, God meets us, and in meeting us he saves the world.

As time moves on, Jesus moves into more and more critical situations. He meets people in their daily search for wine or for water, for food in the desert, for light in their darkness (Nicodemus comes to him by night, and he himself reaches out to a man who has lived all his life sightless.) But today something utterly critical happens: Jesus goes to meet a beloved friend who has died. And in going to him, he goes back into the place where he himself has at last been threatened with death.

We spend a long time pretending that death is of no concern to us. It is something old people can worry about, especially old ill people, especially old mentally ill people. But human life isn't intended to think of it, and a healthy animal like us can appropriately stick the whole unfortunate business on the back-burner; life, we say, is for living. Besides, we say, there's little we can do about it if it comes; and our British philosophers have been telling us for years that questions we cannot answer do not have the right to be asked.

But the question is asked of Jesus because of love; and it is love for those who die which takes us to the place where we can offer no answers of our own, and where we find ourselves questioned beyond our power to reply. *Jesus wept*; and it was necessary that he should weep, and that he should come to stand where we stand, at the sealed tomb of someone that he loved. The picture John gives of him here is ultimately precious to me: he was convulsed, he was turned over with anger at death; he is our champion in the face of it, not cowed and grief-

stricken, but filled with holy anger because death has come so close to him, has laid its hand on one that he loved.

If we had the power to stop death in its tracks here and there, miraculously to cure, or to resuscitate those who have fallen, it would not have about it the ultimacy of Resurrection. It seems to me often wrong to pray for the halting of the journey to the grave, and Jesus is at his firmest when he insists that he himself must go to the Cross. The raising of Lazarus is not a pattern for our intercessions, as we find our own lives being called to Calvary. It is like the other works of the Christ in the Gospel of John: a sign that needs to be seen and deciphered. Jesus goes to the grave of his friend, not to his sick-bed; he does not prevent the death, as a grieving sister would have wanted him to. When he tells Martha, *I am the resurrection*, he is demanding an act of faith from the heart of her mourning; and there is the true miracle, the wonder of trust which she offers him.

His insistence on the opening of the grave is high drama, and the appearance of a dead man emerging from the tomb almost unbearably so. *Jesus*, we are told, *had to die so that he could be Lord both of the dead and of the living*. This lordship over the grave is a sign to us that we should not fear to go into the realm of death, but echo the words of the brave Thomas: *Let us go too, and die with him*. The words of Jesus are eloquent: *Unbind him, let him go free*. Soon the hands of Jesus will be bound at his arrest in the garden; he will no longer be able to reach out to the sick, the poor, or the dead. He will not himself evade the pass from which he releases his friend. He did not return to Judaea thinking to *escape* the threat his disciples feared. He came with his own quiet resolve to die with us, to make this last impossible place the point where God encounters us. As with all his deeds, Jesus changes the place to which he goes, opening it up to divine truth and to the gift of grace.

There is at least one person caught up in the incident who knows where it is leading. If Mary loved him before, she will see him in a new light after this; and that she should bring out her precious ointment, and tip it over his feet to symbolize his burial must tell us how she experienced this encounter: not with relief at a happy ending, not with the feeling that mourning is no longer appropriate: but with the knowledge that this extraordinary man is destined to do battle with death itself, and that he is going to be victorious only by submitting himself to the grave.