

Homily at the Funeral of Mary Theresa Plante, fmm

ISAIAH 25:6A-7-9
ROMANS 8:31B-35
MARK 13:33-37

Last week when Lois contacted me about the arrangements for today she asked me if I had any special readings that I wanted for the liturgy. I said no but that wasn't entirely true. I did have a very special reading in my head. However, having been preaching for forty-seven years, having taught Bible for fifteen years and having lived in a church that can be very trying at times, I have learned to have a strong negative feeling towards what I call biblical detective work. Basically we have all experienced and perhaps even engaged in biblical detective work. What it involves is making up your mind about something and then looking for a bible verse to prove what you have already decided you are going to say. With preaching I have learned it is always better to be led by the readings. It may be difficult at times but ultimately it is the recognition that it is the text which is inspired and not me.

When I got the readings I didn't know whether to laugh or get goosebumps. The reading I would have chosen was from Romans 8. And there it was in the readings Lois sent me. I took that as a sign that I could say what I had hoped to say and still be faithful to the readings.

No matter how we look at it, death is something evil. Of course, we speak of death as a "blessing" when a person has been suffering. And to some extent that is true. But the whole reality of death and suffering is evil. Throughout the entire Bible death is seen as an enemy. To be sure, dying peacefully at a ripe old age was considered good but it was always a far lesser good than living joyfully forever.

Death is always a shock. Even when a person has been sick for a very long time and even when we know that the sickness is fatal, there is something very different between knowing that a loved one is going to die and actually having them die. When a person actually dies, the finality of it hits us in a very different way. Death is the end of all tomorrows. With death *never again* becomes a shocking reality. We must face that and as humans we must grieve and let our grief slowly come to healing. But even that healing does not make the passing of our loved one good; it merely makes it bearable.

Although I can partially understand why, Christians in the west have been preoccupied with death. From the Middle Ages on the crucifix has played a far greater role in western piety than it ever did in the east. Death for a long time seemed to be the primary concern of many Catholic and also Protestant Christians. I admit that the death of Jesus has been a very important thing in Christianity. Yet the Gospels, the New Testament itself, are not primarily about the death of Jesus. The entire New Testament speaks of the Good News and that good news is the news of life. The Gospels announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. The sign of that Kingdom is not death. The signs of the Kingdom of God are rather signs of life: the deaf hear, the blind see, the sick are healed and the poor hear the Good News of salvation which brings life. The message, the Good News, of Jesus is not about death and sadness but about life and joy.

Throughout the Gospels we find Jesus preaching about the all-encompassing love of God. For Jesus God is not primarily king, warrior or law-giver. God is uniquely for Jesus, Abba, Father. So unique is this to Jesus that even Paul, who rarely quotes the Jesus of the Gospels, in chapter of his letter to the Romans which we heard today, says that in the spirit of adoption which we have received, we too cry out Abba, Father! (Rom 8:15) Jesus also reminds us that our God is not a God of the dead but of the living (Luke 20:38) for all things live in God.

This is not to say that the NT does not take death seriously. In the Gospel we find the centurion whose servant was dying, Jairus whose daughter died, Martha and Mary, sisters of the dead Lazarus, for whom death is painfully, frighteningly real. Even for the closest disciples of Jesus his death was incomprehensible. Paul struggles with why there is death in the world but nowhere does the NT ask if death is the end. With Jesus all the writers of the NT are in agreement that death is not the end. And they ground their belief in their experience of the Risen Christ. For a special few, the experience of the Risen Christ is intensely personal—the disciples behind closed doors, Magdalene, the two on the road to Emmaus. But to all, the experience of the Risen Christ is life-transforming, filling them with hope and courage.

The NT never denies the painful, wrenching reality of death—the death of those we love and ultimately our own death. What the NT does do, however, is to proclaim that with death life is changed not taken

away, in the words of the funeral liturgy. We have been symbolically buried into Christ's death and we believe that like Christ we too will walk in the unending newness of life in glory.

It is when death touches us so closely in the passing of a sister, a mentor, a friend that bright light is thrown on our faith. Our faith in the resurrection which, to be honest, we probably don't spend a great deal of time thinking about is now brought to the center of our consciousness. In the midst of the pain, the shock, the sense of loss there wells up from deep inside us that conviction that Christ has risen from the dead and we too rise will rise with him.

Through our faith in the resurrection of Jesus we are not only comforted in our grief and loss; we are strengthened in our conviction that despite everything life is a gift from God. It changes but will never end and we are all held together by the life-giving love of God which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

I would like to end with another citation from Paul's letter to the Romans. He expresses something that I profoundly believe and which can lift us up in our grief. He writes:

“with God on our side, who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son,... we may be certain that he will not refuse anything he can give.... Jesus Christ not only died for us—he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us.

For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever Come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8:31-39 *passim*).

Now as for Mary Theresa there is another biblical verse that I would like to look at. It is from the Book of Proverbs. We have heard it any number of times. It speaks of the “valiant woman.” But the expression in Hebrew is and the important word is *ešet ʔayl* which used many times for men in the Old Testament but only three times for woman, two of which are in Proverbs. Although Proverbs goes on to describe the *ešet ʔayl* in terms of a woman's domestic tasks, we shouldn't take that too seriously. There were not a lot options open to the author. *Ḥayl* means strength—physical, moral and even military.

In Aramaic a *rab ʔayl* is a general. And if we look at the great women of the OT—Miryam, Ruth, Deborah, Esther and Judith—none of them were exactly Martha Stewart types. They were extremely strong people and even warriors. There's a certain ferocity connected with the *ešet ʔayl*. They are definitely not Jane Austen's ideal of the “lady.”

Almost from the outset when I met her in 2006 I thought of Mary as an *ešet ʔayl*. There was a determination to her, a commitment to justice that never wavered and could at times—and here you know better than I—border on ferocity. That was tempered, however, by Mary's insatiable desire to learn. A person for whom learning is important is a person deeply convinced that they don't know everything, that there is always some new to be learned from books, from CDs, from other people. An *ešet ʔayl* who is always open to learning something new may be difficult, may be opinionated but is never obnoxious or arrogant.

Over the years Mary and I talked about what we thought the afterlife might be like—both realizing that we didn't have a clue. Although neither of us were averse to eating and drinking, the notion of an eternal banquet was not high on our list of what we thought would be a cool thing to do for eternity. Harp playing and cloud riding were even lower on the list. I said to her once, “do you know what it's like to work really hard trying to understand something and the pleasure you feel when the ‘light’ finally goes on?” She said yes. I said, “Well God is infinite truth and infinite beauty. I think I could live with an eternity of constant learning, constant new encounters with the eternal Truth and Beauty that is God.” I think she liked that.

When Mary passed away I sent emails to friends and colleagues as far away as Australia. Sometime after Christmas I will collect the responses I got and send them to you, Lois. The most frequent response was gratitude for what she had done to help get Catholic—mostly women—established at the UN. The second most common response was that she was always a powerful advocate to justice and would now be an even more powerful advocate.

It is my hope and belief that she is now immersed in that infinite Truth and Beauty which is the Triune God. She is constantly learning—now without CDs—discovering and being overwhelmed with the joy that only discovery of the infinite can bring.

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