“Do you (really) believe?”

Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed / Forty Hours Celebration

Homily - 2 November 2013

*Wisdom 3:1-9 / Psalm 23 / 1 John 3:14-16 / John 11:21-27*

I promised myself I would not use this line all year, but ... “When I was a seminarian ...”

Actually, when I was a deacon, in Wales (on the other side of the pond), I learned a very profound theological lesson at my first funeral when the pastor pulled me aside beforehand and said, “You just watch ... the darker the clothes, the less they believe.” How true ... though I’m not sure what that says about us, given the color of the attire here at a seminary 😊.

When I told that little tale last week, as part of a retreat presentation to the priests in Arlington, one came up to me afterward to explain how the custom of wearing black at a funeral arose. He told me it originated as a way to make it harder for the evil spirits to see you! Well, we should all be safe 😊.

Now, I should point out that both of those priests are of Irish descent, and we Irish certainly know how to commemorate the departed with a proper all-night send-off!

And we Christians also know how to commemorate the dead, but our custom doesn’t stop at the wake. We pray for the faithful departed every day, and we remember them in a special way throughout the month of November, but especially on this All Souls Day.

Folks of a secular mindset will wonder why we pray for the dead. Some dismiss it as a sign of desperation, the only thing left we can do for those who are gone. Others consider it part of a grand delusion, an easy way to give ourselves some sort of hope. In reality, we pray for the dead as a matter of faith, as an act of confidence that cuts to the very core of what we believe.

Nothing strikes at the heart of what we believe like death: It is certain ... there’s no escaping it. It is complete ... no one is ever a “little bit” dead or “used to be” dead. And it is confounding ... because we know not when or what lies beyond
So, when people experience death, especially through the **loss of a loved one**, we seek solace and the assurance that things will be all right. We may also wish for alternatives, as did Martha in today’s Gospel, who said: “had you been here, he would not have died” and “whatever you ask, I know it will be given.” Oh, how she wishes, as do we, that it were not so, that there be some other way.

But Jesus makes it perfectly clear, there is only one way. He is rather blunt and to the point: “**I am the resurrection and the life.**” I doubt he was concerned about being pastorally sensitive about it! He comes right out and says, “**I am the resurrection and the life. ... Do you believe this?**”

Well? Do you?

Do you believe that life is **from Jesus**? ... not only in the eternal Word’s generation of all things but also – and more significantly – from the act of divine power by which Christ crucified has conquered death.

Do you believe that life is **for Jesus**? ... in return for his giving His life for us on that Cross, a donation that is the fullest expression of love and from which derives the salvation of the world.

Do you believe that life is **of Jesus** and is eternal? ... a life not simply of unending duration but one qualitatively distinct from that of this world – a divine life communicated to us already through the Spirit of God within us and yet to be fulfilled in that beatific union of our souls with God in heaven.

“**I am the resurrection and the life,**” Jesus tells Martha. “**Do you believe this?**” he asks also of us.

In these **40 Hours**, you have a blessed opportunity: to ponder His question; to grapple with the reality of death, especially the prospect of our own; to pray for the souls of all the faithful departed and those whose faith God alone knows; and most of all, to give thanks ... for the gift of Jesus – whom we know to be our resurrection and life, the Christ – who has come into the world and into the lives of all who mourn, the very same Son of God – who remains present to us in the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist.

As now we go to His altar, let us renew and affirm our faith in Jesus and remember, with soulful affection, all our loved ones who have gone before us. **May their souls, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN.**

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