

Jesus Christ, Risen Indeed, is Lord of Life and Full of Mercy

Homily Notes for Second Sunday after Easter

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Note: This is not a set homily text, but mainly some key aspects which a homilist may use.

The Resurrection of Jesus is the remarkable triumph of the Holy Trinity over sin, death, and any hopelessness in the face of persecution and fear. His bodily resurrection and the encounter of Thomas with Jesus is a powerful proof of the resurrection of the body and our own hope for this as well. From these radical truths come the reality of divine mercy and forgiveness for everyone. All this is powerful medicine for anyone fearing death and thinking of bypassing the dying process by euthanasia or by assisted suicide. "My Lord and my God!" can overcome anything.

Acts 5: 12-16

The book of *Acts* is a living account of the early Church's faith in the risen Lord. It records the subsequent struggle in the early Christian community to be strengthened and led by the faith as they endured the trials of persecution, growing pains, inner discord and a delayed second coming of Jesus. Written in the early 80s for second generation Christians who had lost their authoritative eye-witnesses to the Resurrection, it presents dramatic, pictorial and very theological stories, in the genre of "cultic-biography". These stories are meant to legitimate the foundations of Christianity. They also trace an unbroken line of tradition from the "founders" of the faith to the disciples by connecting the words and works of the "founder" with those of the disciples. All this is suggested at the beginning of Luke's gospel.. "...so that your excellency may realize what assurance you have for the instruction you have received." (Luke 1:4)

The key factor of this continuity between Jesus and the early church operative in both periods was, and continues to be, the Holy Spirit. It is this same Spirit who empowered Jesus to preach, teach, heal, and to rise from the dead. This same Spirit transforms the disciples to do the same. Luke's summary of this amazing work of the Spirit is a literary signal to encourage and remind the reader that the early church was making progress in sharing its good and talents, witnessing to the Good News liturgically and catechetically, and steadily increasing in numbers. The miracles and healings testified to in today's pericope, are signs of the eschatological age of salvation. Truly, Jesus Christ is risen indeed, with us now, and powerfully at work in overcoming anything which can distract us from doing God's will.

Application

We are also in a transition period today, moving from a society based on Judeo-Christian beliefs to one of multi-cultural values and secular humanistic influences. Once again, we are being challenged to dig deep into our mine of truths, especially those which assert that we are all children of the Creator, God our heavenly Father, who alone "owns" us and loves us. God alone has given us the gift of human life when we received our individual human souls and God alone ultimately decides when our earthly pilgrimage should end. Our radical human dignity is rooted in this fundamental truth.

The late Fr. Anthony Durand once said that without any belief in an over-arching creator of all the universe, there is little hope of radically resisting any kind of suicide from a rational point of view. Human reasons can all too easily be conjured up as to why any kind of seemingly intractable suffering should be relieved by taking specific steps to intervene, either by commission or omission, to end such

suffering. Sad to say, this is an admission that there is no further hope for this person and that such suffering is totally meaningless for both the one suffering and for those ministering to this person. It is an admission that humanly speaking, we have failed. It is also a declaration that I am the “owner” of my body and I am free to do whatever I want with it, especially at life’s end. No longer is Jesus my Lord and my God. It can also mean that my community has nothing to say regarding the value of life that is in deep suffering. So-called “Rights to Die” soon become “Duties to Die”. Any prolonged hardship and even expense for the one suffering can easily be weighed against present and future needs of other members of the family. Such a mind-set indicates that once again our culture is demonstrating another sign of its impending demise.

But, our radical hope as Christians is that no suffering is meaningless, that God’s love is always available, and that there are ways of handling intractable suffering such as appropriate pain-relief and palliative care. It is here that our believing communities can make a powerful witness to the Good News of the Resurrection of Jesus and his healing Spirit in our hearts and bodies. “Peter’s shadow” in *Acts* today, represents God’s power present in his disciples. It is similar to touching the hem of Jesus’ own garment in the gospels. It is this power that brings new hope, inner peace and deep healing to the sick lying on cots and mats, to those deeply troubled by “unclean spirits” of clinging addictions, serious illnesses and daunting despair. And *Acts* simply says, “...and they were all cured.” Since Christians believe in the power of Christ’s love and mercy, any kind of suicide is unacceptable. The power of God can handle anything.

John 20:19-31

We *always* hear this gospel on the Octave day of Easter. This appearance of Jesus to the disciples after his resurrection breathes powerful hope and new life into their hearts. Jesus’ resurrected body and Thomas’s encounter with him is visible proof of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This also points to the hope of our own bodily resurrection in the future and, therefore, the importance of our bodies.

In the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the apostles, their fear and trepidation is represented by the locked doors, which are no match for his glorified body. As they look at him with utter amazement he greets them with that beautiful Hebrew word “Shalom”, “Peace”, which has the meaning of a tangible force of reconciliation, harmony and total togetherness. It is like fearful sailors spotting a lighthouse on a storm-tossed sea. It is their first experience of his willingness to forgive them after their terrible denials and abandonment of him during his passion. This is also a peace which is being given to a community who will experience the hatred of the world and its persecution of them.

In showing them his hands and his side, John is reminding us of the words of Luke (24:38-40) that Jesus is not a ghost. There is a continuity between the earthly and the risen Jesus. It is the same Jesus. He repeats his greeting of peace so that the disciples can realize that it is truly the Lord speaking. And now he breathes on them with that same spirit which breathed order out of the chaos in the account of creation in *Genesis*. This is the Holy Spirit bestowing on them the power to forgive with the mercy of God. Forgiving or retaining sins is not just about reconciling people in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but radically about bearing witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus. And it is a loving, merciful and forgiving God in whom we believe. This is what we receive when the Spirit is breathed on us.

The story of Thomas invariably conjures up the idea of “doubting Thomas”. The original Greek does not use any word involving “doubt”, though some translations use it. Literally, it reads “Do not be unbelieving but believing.” Jesus is urging Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief. This will lead Thomas to the most powerful and complete confession of Jesus in the gospel of John: “My Lord and my God!” This goes right back to the first chapter of John: “The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (*Jn* 1:1) Here is Thomas seeing God fully revealed in Jesus. Thomas is now answering the

searing question put to Peter by Jesus: “But you, who do you say I am?” (*Mt 16:16*)

The whole story centres on Jesus, not on the disciples or on Thomas. It is a powerful testimony of being moved from fearful hiding and despondency to fresh hope, new peace, and powerful forgiveness. And by having the disciples receive all this, we are reminded that we too will receive such gifts from the risen Lord. Our present generation is at no disadvantage in comparison to the disciples of the early church. The Spirit of Jesus is just as present to us today as it was to the disciples in that locked-up room.

Application:

Belief in the risen Lord who is truly with us has many implications for the questions of euthanasia and assisted suicide. It was the will of God the Father which decided when Jesus would die and rise. Jesus was fully obedient to the will of God.

The key distinction in the question of physician-assisted suicide is between killing and allowing to die. Euthanasia is the deliberate killing of someone by action or omission, with or without that person’s consent, for compassionate reasons. Some of our Canadian people want this to be legalized so that it can be effectively done by physicians. This totally removes such a death from our faith-perspective of surrendering to God’s will as to when we are to die. Again, Jesus is no longer my Lord and my God.

However, as Christians and Catholics, we do not believe that life is to be maintained at all costs. Human life is not our final goal, but only our penultimate goal. When we are in the dying process and there is great hardship for the one suffering and for those tending to his or her care, when there is great expense or pain or suffering, and when there is no reasonable hope of success for continued treatments, then we may palliate the person with comfort care and allow death to come. We may use all the pain-relief necessary since people normally do not die from doing this but from the sickness itself. Like Pope John Paul II, whose death anniversary we celebrated yesterday and who refused further treatments at the end of his life, we too can surrender ourselves to our heavenly Father and allow death to come.

Comforted and forgiven by the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Sick, and strengthened by the Sacrament of the Dying, Holy Viaticum, we realize the power of the forgiveness and peace of Jesus given to the disciples and to all of us after his resurrection. And if we are fortunate to be surrounded by our loved ones when we die, we truly experience the communal gift of the Spirit in our dying. And our ultimate hope is that we too will share in a bodily resurrection in eternal life just like Jesus himself.

This is death in the light of our belief in the Risen Lord. This is the deep *Shalom*, peace, which Jesus wants us to have as we pass over into eternal life. This is the Good News we offer to everyone.

Further Suggestions for the homily:

1. Clearly, for most homilists there probably is too much material in the above to be used in one time-appropriate homily. We suggest praying over the readings and the suggested materials and selecting two or three key insights about the readings and then choosing two or three key aspects from our Catholic teachings which are relevant to the question of physician-assisted suicide. The rest of the details of our teachings could be covered by recommending a close reading of the bulletin insert provided by the Ontario bishops.
2. The homily could be greatly enhanced by sharing a real story of how someone was comforted in

dying through the loving presence of others, by receiving the sacraments, and especially by the use of some kind of palliative care in the dying process. This would be a great way of helping people to appreciate the value of Advance Directives as well as the most humane and respectful teachings of our church as to the value of every human being, the difference between being a vitalist (“preserve life no matter what”), a “libertarian” (“I will decide no matter what.”), and our faith-teaching of allowing death to come according to the will of God.

References used and cited:

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- Catholic Health Association of Canada, *Health Ethics Guide*, Ottawa, 2000, pp. 53-59.