

HOMILY AT THE FUNERAL OF FR. JAMES KELLY S.J.

Fr Bill Callanan SJ

Gospel Reading: THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS (John, 11: 1-44)

Mention was made yesterday afternoon, at the reception of James' remains in Cherryfield Lodge, of his repeatedly expressed desire that there be no eulogy at today's funeral Mass. Since the Eulogy is, by definition, an address emphasising the praiseworthy qualities of the deceased, I feel duty bound to play down this aspect in what follows. I do not believe this caveat arose from 'false modesty' on James part, but in my view it stemmed rather from James' deeply felt sense of his Priestly ministry, and of the central place held by the preaching of the Word of God in it. All too often, in James view, in funeral allocutions the preacher places his or her main emphasis on the merits or demerits of the deceased. This approach has often resulted in dwelling on the biographical details of their life history, singling out their successes and lauding their accomplishments. The result tended to be that little time was given to the message of the gospel which related most directly to those present, - What is the meaning of Death for the Christian? Had this been kept more in view one would have heard more input taking account of John Donne's advice "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, - it tolls for Thee."

Dying, for the non-believer is most likely to represent, above all else, the loss of all that we hold most dear in Life. As such it can be feared as a deprivation, or at the very least, as a dreaded venture into unknown territory. A pall of resignation and anxious foreboding is to be expected where alleviating Hope is ruled out 'a priori'. The end of Life, for the unbeliever, signals a stoical resignation on our part to the cruel fact that with Life's termination marks the final erasure of all that we are and have been from the face of the earth.

By contrast how different is the prospect to which the Christian message calls us. The Christian understanding of Death underpins the whole texture and meaning of our life. It could indeed be said that a major 'task' of the life of any Christian consists in building up within ourselves the necessary trust in God's love for us to enable us to emulate the words of Jesus on the Cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." In Jesus' final words we sense an attitude not of passive resignation or dread, but of voluntary acceptance of his death in a conscious handing-back of his life at its close to its source, voluntarily and with confidence. Acquiring this confidence involves a prior struggle within ourselves from which even Jesus was not immune. In Gethsemane we are shown how Jesus' prayer starts with his desire 'that this chalice pass me by', and equally by his bloody sweat of fear at his approaching Passion. Only at His third agonised attempt does Jesus succeed finally in coming to accept the role

he was destined to enact in His Father's Salvific plan. How many nights in prayer had he spent during His life preparation for this final act of acceptance in His vigils communing with his Father in ever growing conviction in order to arrive at this final confidence that 'you always listen to me'?

St. Thomas Aquinas had a dictum: "The Supernatural builds on the Natural" which teaches us that great inner spiritual accomplishments are based not on flashes of heroism, so much as on a gradual interior learning that "All will be well, and all manner of things will be well." The Old Testament tells us: "The Kingdom of Heaven is very near to you. It is not far from you so that you have to ask "Who will go to the ends of the sea to fetch it back for us?", nor is it so far beyond your reach so that you must ask "Who will go up to heaven to bring it down to us?" No, it is very near to you: it is in your heart and on your lips." Certain convictions that are deeper than reason can take root in the soul, with God's grace, and lead us gradually towards a set of spiritual beliefs which more and more act as a sure guide in our attitudes and actions. My own mother Una, (a 'Kelly' from James' beloved Kilbeggan!), liked to repeat a phrase, - "What I gave I have."- when a situation called for a Christian act of self-abnegation on her part. Growing up I was often curious as to why she seemed to cling to such an illogical belief. To my way of thinking her proposition seemed to fly in the face of common sense. Surely if something that belonged to you was sacrificed, then you would, ever after, be the poorer for having given it away. Only later was I able to realize the meaning of her words. With increased experience of life I became aware that the joy of giving can often be a rich compensation for the trifling sacrifice involved. This is part of the souls coming to appreciate reality on a spiritual level. Through this process we are ultimately called on to grow to our full capacity, finally acknowledging at the level of direct personal experience, that whatever happens to us in life is fundamentally God's gift. Our response to these circumstances, god willing, gradually transforms into a deep feeling of acceptance and gratitude. This interior achievement of this process is the rock which enables us to see, as its culminating expression, the willing surrender of our life at its close.

The Gospel reading for our mass was chosen for its moving illustration of several of the points raised above. We are struck in the opening verses by the level of intimacy that we are told united the main protagonists. We can guess that a level of trust has built up between these three and Jesus. The several statements; "Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus.", the comments of the by-standers "See how he loved him...", and Jesus anguish at the grief of those who were in mourning, (weeping and sighing in a gesture that, we are told, 'came straight from the heart'), assure us that even at the purely human level their pain moved Jesus deeply. It is this human spark of confidence that has developed between the three and Jesus that forms the foundation for a series of exchanges through which Christ reveals to the deeper implications of what 'following Christ' consists in for the believer. Using the

circumstances of their distress Jesus invites the sisters to a deeper level of trust, and to belief in His central mission to assure mankind that the love of God 'conquers even death'. When Jesus responds to Martha's distress with "Your brother will rise again." Martha accepts this truth, but at a level of 'knowing' more akin to received knowledge, - "I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day" - than at the level of personal Faith. Jesus' response is pitched at an altogether deeper level: "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" The link between experience, trust and belief are brought into living actuality at the level of direct experience. The concluding lines of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins deal with this flash of transformation in one's faith that radically transforms our destiny as human beings: "In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and this Jack joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,... Is immortal diamond."

It is striking to note the small number of occasions when Jesus, by inviting his interlocutors to deepen their trust in him, enters into the heart of life's mystery with even the most seemingly unlikely persons: one thinks of the Samaritan woman, or of Jesus' exchanges with Mary Magdalene on the morning of the Resurrection, when, with Mary distraught and unable to distinguish 'the Master' from the lowly gardener, Jesus, with great tenderness and respect merely has to say her name, - 'Mary' - for her joy and confidence in Him to come flooding back. As with the sisters of Lazarus, Jesus responds to Mary's gesture of embracing His feet in gratitude and relief by quietly assuring her that she must bring the message of the Resurrection to the disciples and that - in his newly Resurrected body - he is now preparing to enter into the heavenly realm where grief will be wiped away.

As Christians it is our hope that, like the souls mentioned, we are also on a journey that ultimately will make us capable of placing our hope in God's loving plan of preparing a home for us in heaven. Our role is to surrender our souls into His loving care in a final act of total acceptance and trust. This 'soul-work' will be the culmination of all the sacrifices and preparatory prayers we have uttered in our hearts through our lives.

I am grateful to James for nudging us to reflect on how we, as those who mourn his passing, have progressed in our journey to the Heavenly mansion in which James hoped. We thank him for the struggles he endured in trying to live out to the full his priestly calling. And, where his human weakness sometimes led to shortcomings, we commend him to God's great mercy.