

Sunday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Year A

Ez 37: 12-14
Psalm 130 1-8
Rom 8: 8-11
John 11: 1-45

T. Shawn Tracy, O.S.A.
St. Augustine Friary
Villanova, Pennsylvania

My brother in law died some months ago after a long experience of cancer. There was one unforgettable circumstance about his death that the family has been talking about ever since. It happened this way.

Bill referred to an appointment at 9:47 AM to a number of people during the long week before he died. These were a variety of people – some were not even family members. As his body was failing and he was approaching death, the family gathered in prayer and support. Bill was very aware and spiritually very attuned to what was happening. Finally his body gave out and he did die – at exactly 9:47 AM.

Needless to say our family has been taken with this story ever since, and today's Gospel of the death of Lazarus has caused me to focus on *life* and the subtle and constant presence of the Spirit.

More and more I hear or read where people are asking this basic question. Are we spiritual beings having a physical experience - or are we physical beings with a spiritual aspect? The question is asked as though it were an either/ or question. We are both physical and spiritual, and there is no need to prioritize one over the other. But that answer leads us to ask other questions.

We live in a culture with many ambiguities. While medical advances, healing drugs and remarkable illness-battling innovations are occurring constantly in our age, there is always the subtle suggestion that we can extend our lives indefinitely.

We are all aware how young people, infused with energy and naiveté with their reckless driving and other behaviors, can live as though death is far away in some vague and distant future.

We can also be inordinately focused on how we *appear* to others, our dress, hair styles, resumes, status in work, social status in society, number of cars, houses and neighborhoods in which we live, schools we attend, and so forth. We are being 'mauled' by our malls, and we often hear criticism of this as the 'materialism of our age.'

In other words there is a 'denial of death' bias that sits like a shadow behind much of our so-called life styles, and as long as it is there our spiritual and religious hidden in the darkness. I believe that underneath this 'denial of death' attitude is a denial and failure to recognize the life of Spirit.

Physicality appears to be our most conscious awareness. Spiritual concerns are less conscious and apparently of a lesser priority. We become overwhelmed by the power

offered to us by our “things.” Our vision of life becomes therefore split - with physicality becoming the winner! A dualism results and ‘spirit’ is devalued.

In the Gospel today Jesus waits four days before calling Lazarus forth from the tomb. Physical death does not seem to be the problem; for Jesus, *life* is the focus.

As my brother in law was dying, he became an example to us of a well-integrated faith experience. He was in this world passing through death. But he was also doing so with a deep faith and trust in God’s presence. The integration of the two – in my opinion – was manifested in his awareness of the hour of his death ... 9:47AM. Where did he get this knowledge? Why would he announce this so assuredly to many of us throughout the week? What is the significance of such a startling – and haunting - pronouncement?

I can tell you now, months later, that our family has been intrigued by this incident; we see it clearly as a sign of the deep presence of spirit in life. We are reassured that we in faith do live in the Risen Christ and that there is a transcending love all around us in ordinary appearances – and not just in death! I call this a miracle in consciousness and a testimony to ‘risen life.’

Most of us *fear* death. We struggle with the idea that all that we have will somehow be lost and abandoned to an unknown destiny that awaits us. We do not see how our identities have been overwhelmingly tied up into our successes, possessions, accomplishments, reputations, and the like. In this kind of consciousness we do not know who we are. We reveal lives lived more by substance than by faith.

It is interesting how Lazarus came forth from the tomb at the call of Jesus, “Lazarus, come forth.” He was clothed in the dressings of death, but also the clothing of the newly baptized believer whose understanding of the sacred rite included the pivotal “death to self” so necessary for living by the Spirit. And then Jesus said to them, “Untie him and set him free.” Would that each of us could set free from all the bandages and vestiges of “things” that bring us to a point of addiction and deadened life.

In this fifth Sunday of Lent, with the powerful story of the raising of Lazarus, we need to be ready to identify any imbalance between our ‘worldly’ embrace and our spiritual well being. Our focus can be on the will of Christ to call us out of the encumbrances of tomb and stone and darkness and abandonment into the light of community, family and church.

After all, who of us does not seek authentic freedom? We long to hear the voice of a faithful God who can say to those around us, ‘Untie him!’ ‘Set her free.’ ‘Loosen their bonds.’

The time and manner of our death is one thing; the way we live our lives is another! Live your life as well as you are able, of course! But be sure to live your physical life by Spirit. For each of us has an appointment - but it’s not necessarily with what we call death. It’s with the Lord whose presence continuously offers to us ... Eternal Life.