

Funeral Liturgy
Patricia A. Cummings
February 9, 2018

Over the years I have learned that many folks in the Catholic community have different understandings of what we do when we gather for the celebration of a funeral Mass. Certainly the reason why we gather at this moment in this sacred space of the college Chapel is the death of my sister Patricia. But the purpose of our gathering is different, and really much more important. The purpose of our gathering is to worship the Triune God; to give thanks and praise to God the Father, God the Son and God The Holy Spirit. For at each and every Mass we enter again the paschal mystery: commemorating Jesus' life, earthly death and celebrating his glorious rising to new life. And it is this mystery that we share and celebrate in a particular way with my sister Patricia in mind.

The passage from Mark's Gospel foreshadows this paschal mystery. It is the second of three passion predictions that Jesus makes on his way to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Ministering to God's people and preaching a new vision of the Kingdom, Jesus goes from town to town on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem with a band of followers offering people mercy and forgiveness. And as they travel Jesus tries to teach his disciples, to help them understand his real identity and his true mission. Three times Jesus tells

them specifically what waits for him in Jerusalem and three times they misunderstand. The first time Peter tries to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem altogether; the second instance which we hear this morning, the disciples argue among themselves as to who is the greatest and the third time James and John ask for seats of power. The three reactions of the disciples to Jesus' proclamation of mission are indicative of their misunderstanding. Jesus can't be talked out of his mission, the sacrifice of the cross does not involve greatness; and being a servant of all does not mean vying for seats of power.

Each time the disciples misunderstand Jesus, he tries to teach them. The lesson we hear today is Jesus' universal call of service to others and the embracing of the least among us. And he takes a child in his arms to dramatize his point. For a child in first century Palestine was one of the most vulnerable persons in society. A child was a nonentity, a dependent, insignificant and could be a drag on society especially if the child was an orphan. A child had no status and no importance. A child was someone you would not go out of your way to visit or whose presence you would not even bother to acknowledge.

Yet Jesus says "if you receive such a child, you receive me." The Kingdom of God is for such people. Jesus challenges his followers not to

think in terms of social hierarchies. Jesus has a new outlook - the vulnerable, the lame, the mentally challenged, the possessed, lepers, outcasts and sinners are all made in the image and likeness of God and because of that, possess a unique dignity.

When I think of my sister Patricia, she was a perpetual child due to her delayed mental development. And she was someone who easily fell through the cracks of our society and was easily forgotten. But there are people in the world like those of Howard Center, some of whom are serving as Patricia's Pallbearers today, whose mission is to preserve the dignity of the human person while giving them loving care. And this is exactly what Jesus preaches as the new vision of the kingdom of God. Barriers that society puts up, the emphasis on class and social status, casting aside and forgetting the lame, Jesus rejects in favor of embracing vulnerable persons whether they be orphans, widows, mentally challenged or lepers. This was Jesus' vision for the Kingdom. And he was killed for it.

But the story did not end there and this is the purpose of our worship. The prophet Daniel describes the liberating scene in which Michael the Archangel as Guardian of the people of Israel lead people in their escape of death and sees to it that the wise, the elect, the chosen people of Israel are awakened from their sleep and live forever. This is the earliest enunciation

of the resurrection in the Hebrew scriptures and foreshadows what we Christians see as the action of God raising Jesus from the dead.

With such Jewish background, St. Paul fully articulates in his writings our communal and personal hope in the resurrection. Because of Jesus' rising from the dead, we too will share in the resurrection. St. Paul writes elsewhere: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ." With these words St. Paul explains quite succinctly what the doctrine of the resurrection means for our Christian faith: it is its very foundation. As our previous Pope, Benedict XVI commented: "The Christian faith stands or falls with the truth of the testimony that Christ is risen from the dead." (1 Cor 15:13-15 from Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week)

We gather sisters and brothers with this resurrection faith. With our prayers, we aid Patricia, loving sister and aunt, to go beyond the firmament of the sky to the heavenly host where a seat at the eternal banquet table has been prepared for her. We can be sure that the challenges Tricia faced in this life and the struggles with her health she experienced will no longer cause her suffering. Despite our greatest efforts, her ability to continue living deteriorated but she fell asleep in peace. And now may God awaken her to the glory of resurrected life forever. Amen.

And to my friends at Howard Center serving as pallbearers and other staff, including RN Sarah Forrest who could not be here due to another shift at the hospital caring for patients, I thank you on behalf of our family for all you have done for our sister, god-mother and aunt. God bless you.

Homily given at Funeral Mass by
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Chapel of Saint Michael the Archangel
Saint Michael's College
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