

A New Day

Probably I should have my head examined, but I'm going to start off this All Saints Day homily, this solemn day when we recall our blessed dead, this high holy day of remembering those we have lost, I'm going to start things off with this!

"It's the story about Yaakov, a farmer living in Israel's lush Galilee region, who was giving a tour of his farm to his new mother-in-law.

The newlywed farmer genuinely tried to be friendly with her, hoping it would be a warm, loving, relationship.

All to no avail however, as she kept nagging him at every opportunity, demanding changes, offering unwanted advice, and generally making life unbearable for Yaakov and his new wife.

While they were walking through the barn, Yaakov's mule suddenly reared up and kicked the mother-in-law, killing her instantly.

It was a shock to all, no matter their feelings towards her.

At the funeral service, Yaakov and his wife sat as well-wishers paid their respects.

The rabbi, however, noticed, that whenever a woman would whisper something to Yaakov, he would nod his head yes and say something.

Whenever a man walked by and whispered to Yaakov, however, he would shake his head no, and mumble a reply.

Very curious as to this bizarre behavior, the rabbi later asked Yaakov what that was all about.

Yaakov replied: "The women would say: 'What a terrible tragedy,' and I would nod my head and say 'yes, it was.'

The men would then ask, "Can I borrow that mule?" and I would shake my head and say, "Cannot, ..., it's all booked up for a year." Kurtz, *Experiencing Spirituality*, 81.

I tell you this story because although today is indeed a solemn, high holy day when we remember and mourn our blessed dead, it is also a day to laugh.

A day to laugh because the whole of our faith is all about this central truth:

In Jesus, God defeats death.

In God, there is no death.

Saint Paul says it plainly, "If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ.

And face it – if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors . . . if there's no resurrection." 1 Cor 15, The Message Tr.

But because resurrection is real, St. Paul says we shall be "fellow workers with God in the new creation."

The fact of the matter is, this present life has value precisely because God will raise our bodies into something new in the transformed creation that is the resurrection.

This is the promise of God!

This is the hope of the saints who have gone before us!

This is the taproot of our faith!

And if that's not something worth smiling about, even laughing about, then I don't know what is.

Now don't get me wrong.

None of this means we get to jump over the horrific pain that grief brings when your loved one or mine dies.

I know something about that pain, and so do so many of you.

We walk today with Lisa-Anne and the girls as we mourn together Allen's too early death.

And we remember our friends who have died just this year: Bernice Kau and Ray Au, Tom Young and Harriet Harris, Chris Ling and Kay Park, Florence Furuto and Flora Wong, Concisa Bartoline and Bobby Leong, Lily Ho and Polly Gifford and Uncle Ray Leong.

But should we ever think to ourselves that somehow God has a hand in the dying of one we love, just look at today's gospel lesson.

Jesus weeps.

He feels the loss of his best friend Lazarus just as you and I, meaning, that God never wills the death of any person – and when any person is struck by the tragedy that is death – it is God's heart that is the first to break.

"To weep at tragedy as Jesus wept is to weep at that which is inevitable.

In the face of human vulnerability and the storms, natural and manmade, that afflict the world, tragedy is bound to happen.

Given our sinfulness and the temptation of the world to sin, tragedy is bound to happen.

We are as surely born to trouble as sparks naturally fly upward, says Job, so of course we shall shed tears over it.

It's all part of what it means to be human.

But that is not all it means to be human." Buchner, *Telling the Truth*, 56, paraphrased.

Into our seemingly hopeless condition, God, through Jesus, reaches in, making all things new.

And through Jesus, we come to meet, seemingly for the first time, God the "comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of the one lost sheep than the 99 who had the brains not to go wandering in the first place.

We come face to face with God the eccentric host who, when the country club folks turn down the dinner invite, rustles up the bums on skid row and empties the charity kitchens and fills his feast with the rabble of the world.

People like the man with no legs who sells shoelaces on the corner, and the old lady in the moth eaten fur coat who spends her days scrounging for cans in the rubbish bin, not to mention the wino swooning over his brown paper bagged bottle, or the pusher and the whore and the card shark, all suddenly honored guests at the biggest party ever thrown." Id at 66, paraphrased.

Here they all are, sitting at the table of fine linen and champagne and three forks for salad, all because God delights in life for all of us.

Eventually, even the country club crowd comes around....

It's been that way from the very beginning: where we see no way, God makes a way — whether it's the murderer Moses who leads a people through oceans and deserts; to the illegal alien named Ruth whose great great grandson will turn out to be King David; to the wild and scary prophetic voices of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah; all of it coming home in the marvel that is Jesus: who forgives and accepts and challenges and cajoles, who after his seemingly utter failure as Messiah, is raised, alive, and with us.

So here's the question:

"Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all?" Id., 69.

Standing here this morning, surrounded by that cloud of witnesses who are our beloved saints, those who have gone ahead, those we shall one day see again, with no more goodbyes, can we remember to smile, and yes, even perhaps to laugh at the sheer marvel of it all?

“Heard as anything else, the Gospel is the Church’s thing, the preacher’s thing, the lecturer’s thing.

Heard as a joke — high and unbidden and ringing with laughter — it can only be God’s thing.”
Id., 69, modified.

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