

Lent 5A

This story is told about a pastor of a small congregation. He kept a meticulous register of all his parishioners. Such was his faith in life after death, that whenever a parishioner died he did not delete their name from the register. He simply wrote after the person's name, 'changed residence, gone to a better place'!

Scientists tell us that nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, disappears without a trace. Nature does not know extinction - all it knows is transformation. Since man is the apex, of God's creation, it would border on the absurd if death were to signal the end of our existence.

To me Humanist funerals fall way short of the mark because in their tribute there is little or no mention of the final destiny of the deceased. All they can talk about is the past life of the person. Unfortunately a lot of Church funerals have fallen into that same trap. That doesn't mean, of course, that you don't mention anything about the deceased. But the Christian message is loud and clear and we find it in Jesus's answer to Martha - "I am the Resurrection and the Life - whoever lives and believes in me will never die" Then Jesus turns to Martha and asks: 'Do you believe this'? He asks the same of us.

Martha said to Jesus: 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died'. Aren't we sometimes tempted to ask the same question especially when it comes to the untimely death of a loved one or friend. We could ask: 'Where were you Lord when they were taken from us so unexpectedly'? Many people blame God when people die tragically or they imagine Him standing on the side-lines, oblivious to human suffering.

But the story of Holy Week is that Jesus shares in our brokenness and tragedy-prone world. On hearing of the death of Lazarus, Jesus breaks down - he was genuinely moved to tears. When He did so at the tomb of Lazarus, the Jews said:

'See how much he loved him'. For love of us Jesus takes away the sins of the world but not the suffering of the world. Our Lady promised Bernadette happiness not in this life but the next. I think it would be a retrograde step if this country legalised euthanasia. It's troubling when people feel drawn to end their lives because of the advancing deterioration of their physical or mental faculties. Despite dying in pain and bereft of all dignity, Jesus didn't come down from the cross when the frenzied crowd on Calvary incited him to do so. He drank the cup of suffering to the dregs.

They say that 'love is stronger than death'. It has a kind of eternal resonance about it. It means that the manner of our death or the discomfort associated with it won't faze those who make love the touchstone of their lives. Our Lady asked the children of Fatima in 1917 to offer their sufferings and penances for the salvation of unrepentant sinners. That's unrequited love in action.

So today, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the Church asks us to keep our eyes on the goal which is life Eternal. We are on a journey, however long or arduous, to the Promised Land of heaven. There we shall see God where suffering and sorrow will be no more.