

HOMILY FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

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“The Testament of Mary” is the title of a marvellous novel by the Irish writer Colm Toibin. It tells the story of the life and work of Jesus, but seen through the eyes of Mary his mother. She is not impressed, especially by his disciples and his followers whom she describes as hangers on urging him to confront the Jewish and Roman establishment – with inevitable consequences.

One of the strangest parts of the novel re-tells the story we have just heard in the gospel – the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The miracle is an ambivalent one. It has both good and bad outcomes. Yes, it did happen. Lazarus was raised from the dead. No, it isn't clear that it was a good idea. Whose purposes were being fulfilled? When the dead come back, things often go wrong. The risen Lazarus is an object of fear and confusion. Sitting in a corner, half in and half out of this world. Listen to what Mary says about him:

“Slowly, the figure, caked with clay, and covered with grave clothes wound around him, uncertainly began to move ... like some new creature jerking and wriggling towards life.” And another sentence: *“Lazarus, it was clear to me, was dying. If he came back to life it was*

to say a last farewell to it. He recognised none of us, barely appeared to lift a glass to his lips as he was handed a piece of soaked bread by his sisters”.

We’re told that Jesus loved Martha, her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus. They were like family to him. Perhaps it is only family members who can blame each other when things go wrong. *“If only you had been here, my brother would not have died”* Martha said to Jesus. I think the “if only” questions in life are the most important. And we have all asked them. “If only this hadn’t happened. If only I hadn’t said that. If only I had made a different decision. If only life had been fairer to me. If only my mother, father, brother, sister, husband or wife had not suffered and died, everything would be all right, and I would be happy”. But we need to be careful of what we ask for. As I said, the Lazarus story is ambivalent at the very least. It responds to the needs of Martha and Mary in their grief. They wanted him back. But Lazarus would have to die again having to go through the process all over again. “If he came back to life it was to say a last farewell to it”.

The life and ministry of the priest is to be with people at the moments of great joy in their lives and also at times of greatest confusion and sadness. Continually he will be asked the “if only” questions: “Why does God allow this to happen?”. The priest is called to be a sign of contradiction in his replies, particularly when he invites people during Mass to “... celebrate the sacred mysteries” – sometimes at the most painful times of life. “Celebrate” is a strange word, full of meaning. During the Mass we re-member, re-present the cruel death of an innocent man who went to the cross not

because of any wrong he had done but because he insisted in contradicting the accepted way of life and love. And this is what are asked to celebrate, not just in word but in action too. Jesus said: *“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you”* (Lk 6:27). *“If your neighbour asks you to go one mile, go two with them”* (Matt 5:41). If only! This is the sacrificial love that took Jesus to the cross – and beyond. His mother Mary must have wondered, in every sense of the word, as she stood at the foot of the cross. *“Is this what I agreed to when I said ‘Be it done unto me according to your word’?”*. This is the sacrifice in which we share if we seriously believe what we heard in the letter of St. John: *“This is the love I mean. Not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away”*.

Peter will have had his own “If only” questions during his life, too, not least with the death of his beloved Marie. But he has been, and continues to be, sustained by his faith and support of a loving family. *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world”*. From faith and family he has already served God’s people with love and dedication as a Deacon. In the priesthood, he will be taken to a deeper level in acting with and for people in their relationship with God. *“This is my Body. This is my Blood”*. *“I absolve you from your sins”*.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was one of the ‘signs’ of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was a sign of the life to come. Today, Peter will be “signed” with the Oil of Chrism on his hands as he begins a new life at the age of 71. Today is the first day of the rest

of your life. That is why I ask you to join your prayer to mine when I say:

“May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfilment”. Amen.