

Last Stronghold of the Devil: death (Year B)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk. 5: 21-43)

When Jesus had crossed in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered round him and he stayed by the lake side. Then one of the synagogue officials came up, Jairus by name, and seeing him, fell at his feet and pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is desperately sick. Do come and lay your hands on her to make her better and save her life.

Jesus went with him and a large crowd followed him' they were pressing all round him. Now there was a woman who had suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years; after long and painful treatment under various doctors, she had spent all she had without being any the better for it, in fact, she was getting worse.

She had heard about Jesus, and she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his cloak. "If I can touch even his clothes," she had told herself "I shall be well again." And the source of the bleeding dried up instantly and she felt in herself that she was cured of her complaint.

Immediately aware that power had gone out of him Jesus turned round in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "You see how the crowd's pressing round you and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" But he continued to look all round to see who had done it. Then the woman came forward, frightened and trembling because she knew what had happened to her and she fell at his feet and told him the whole truth. "My daughter", he said "your faith has restored' you to health; go in peace and be free of your complaint."

While he was still speaking some people arrived from the house of the synagogue official to say, "Your daughter is dead: why put the Master to any further trouble?" But Jesus had overheard this remark of theirs and he said to the official, "Do not be afraid; only have faith." And he allowed no one to go with him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. So they came to the official's house and Jesus noticed all the commotion, with people weeping and wailing unrestrainedly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and crying? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

So he turned them all out and taking with him the child's father and mother, and his own companions, he went into the place where the child lay. And taking the child by the hand he said to her, "Talitha, kum!" which means, "Little girl, I tell you to get up."

The little girl got up at once and began to walk about for she was twelve years old. At this they were overcome with astonishment, and he ordered them strictly not to let anyone know about it, and told them to give her something to eat.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

- Dear God's family, last Sunday, we saw Jesus calming the storm in the Lake of Gennesareth, an image of evil powers that try to destroy God's people. By removing sin and its consequences at least from some people, Jesus went on, step by step, setting people free from the dominion of the devil, and placing them gradually under God's loving rule, that is, bringing them into his Kingdom. This Sunday, we see Jesus removing, at least for a time, the most terrible consequence of sin, dislodging the devil from his last stronghold: death.

As long as a sick person holds on to life, we feel we still have chances of winning the battle against death through medicines, through prayer and so on. But once a

person dies, we give up; we all feel helpless, powerless against death. There is a solution for every problem, we say, except for death.

- For lack of time, we are going to leave aside the miracle of the woman Cured of a haemorrhage, though it is a miracle that exerted great attraction on the Christians of all times, because it shows the way to obtain from Jesus whatever we need: through complete trust in him.

In the explanation that follows we shall limit ourselves to the second miracle narrated in today's Gospel: the bringing back to life of the daughter of Jairus.

- Here we have a man of position in the Jewish community of Capernaum, one of its leaders. In all probability, the girl was his only child, a lovely girl about 12 years old. Jairus seems to have pleased Jesus right from the start. He approaches Jesus with great humility and trust at the same time. He not even dares ask him to heal the girl altogether, but just to lay his hands on her that she might get better, that is, to bring her out of danger.

- There was no time to lose; the girl was about to die. We can imagine the anxiety of the good man when the woman suffering from a haemorrhage prevented Jesus from reaching the house immediately. The worst could happen at any moment. In fact, it did: messengers came with the shattering news that the girl had expired.

We can imagine how the news shook the faith of Jairus; he was convinced that Jesus had the power to cure his daughter; but now that she was dead, he must have agreed with the messengers' opinion: "Why put the Master to any further trouble?" (Mk. 5: 35)

Jesus surprises us by doing something he had not done until now with anyone else; he hastened to support the faith of Jairus: "Do not be afraid; only have faith." (Mk. 5: 36)

- The way Jesus acted on reaching the house reveals to us his wonderful heart: He took the dead girl by the hand and pulled her up as a mother would do with her child reluctant to wake up from a deep sleep. "Talitha, kum! which means, 'Little girl, I tell you to get up!'" (Mk. 5: 41)

- Mark wrote his Gospel in Greek, but here, as in some other important moments in Jesus' life, he kept the words "Talitha, kum!" in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, just as he had pronounced them. Early Christians delighted in repeating those words as Jesus had spoken them, as if trying to catch the tone of kindness Jesus had put in pronouncing those words.

Mark ends up his narration with a moving detail: Jesus ordered the parents to give the girl something to eat. It was another way of telling them that the girl was really theirs once again, that she was really alive and needed food as she had always needed it.

1. Death is not God's doing:

We read in the Gospel of three people whom Jesus raised back from death to life: The daughter of Jairus about whom the Gospel of today speaks (Mk. 5: 21-24.35-43); The son of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17); Lazarus the brother of Martha and Mary (Jn. 11: 1-44).

- The way Jesus acted performing these miracles confirms what the first reading of this Sunday says: "Death is not God's doing" (Wis.1:13). The Book of Wisdom says in another passage: "God made man imperishable; he made him in the image of his own nature" (Wis 2:23).

Writing to the Christian of Rome Paul says that "God never withdraws his gifts (Rom 11:29) and life was God's most precious gift to man.

Death made Jesus really sorry. Only he could measure the havoc sin had caused in man, wrecking his Father's loving plans for him

- Death was brought about by sin, or rather, by the envy of the devil who led our first parents to disobey God. Sin brought first and foremost, spiritual death, the destruction of God's life in man, and as a consequence, also the destruction of man's natural life, the life of his body. That is, once spiritual death set in the loss of natural life was only a question of time. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3: 19)

- We should not interpret these words as punishment inflicted by God on our first parents, and still less as an act of revenge which God took on them, but rather, as the announcement of a sad consequence of their folly, which God made, humanly speaking, "with a heavy heart": now that sin had destroyed God's life in them, there was nothing that could prevent it from doing away also with their natural life.

Sin was such a deadly poison, that once injected into man, life was no longer possible.

2. Jesus came into the world to destroy death:

- Jesus became man first and foremost to destroy spiritual death, by restoring to man the divine life which sin had destroyed in him. But he came to destroy natural death as well. The people whose sin Jesus forgave and whose diseases he cured, became signs, clear signs of the final and complete victory he would obtain over death. Paul says that death will be the last enemy to be destroyed, but destroyed will it be (1 Cor. 15: 26).

In fact Saint Paul mocks death, the last enemy: "Death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 15:55-56).

- *How would Jesus obtain his victory over death?*

The answer is: by dying; through his own death followed by his resurrection: through his death on the cross, Jesus made pardon available to everyone. As from that moment, God's divine life too, the very life by which Jesus himself lived, would be available to all.

And once spiritual life was restored to man, it was a question of time before natural death too would be done away with. Sin put man on his way to death; Jesus put him on his way back to life.

- It is at Baptism that we are given the Life in the Spirit; as far as divine life is concerned, a true resurrection takes place in us when we are baptised. As far as natural life is concerned, our victory over death is yet to be attained. Christians continue to die, also after Baptism, just as non-baptised people do. Yet, the seed of life which the Holy Spirit plants in our heart at Baptism, will yield one day, among its many other fruits also the resurrection of our own body. Thus Baptism marks the beginning of our victory also over our natural death.

3. When do we eventually overcome death completely?

- *Just as we die*, if we die in the Lord, that is, with the Life in the Spirit within us. When on his death-bed, a Christian repeats the words of Jesus on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23: 46), he puts his life into God's hands, that is, beyond the reach of death, as a child entrusts what he treasures most into the hands of his father for safe keeping.

- What happened at Jesus' death is repeated in every Christian: just as the devil thinks he is obtaining his last victory as we die, it is then that he will be defeated for good: where death ends true life begins. Death is for a Christian the door that leads him to eternal life.

This well understood by the early Christians who considered the day when a Christian died, his or her birthday.

We Christians have a solemn assurance given by Christ himself when he said: I am the resurrection and the life; if anyone believes in me, even though he dies, he will continue to live" (Jn 11: 26).

But for death to be so, our whole life should become a series of partial victories over death by making it a series of victories over sin. Let us bear this well in mind: whatever good we do in life, whatever evil we overcome, is a victory over death, also over natural death, and a preparation for the final victory we shall obtain as we die.

- You might wonder: but what about our final resurrection at the end of the world?

Scripture does speak of a final resurrection of all men at the second coming of Christ, when even the last remnants of death will disappear. Says Paul in his first letter to the Christians of Thessalonika: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again; and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus." (1 Thes. 4: 14)

- In fact, early Christians called the burial places “cemeteries”, a word which means “sleeping places”, places where those who died are waiting as in a deep sleep for the voice of Christ to wake them up. Actually, we can say of every Christian who dies in the Lord what Jesus said of the daughter of Jairus: “The child is not dead, but asleep” (Mk. 5: 39)

Yet, what matters for us, is our personal death and the life that follows it right away; as we shall be found at our death, so shall we be found at the final resurrection, at the second coming of Christ.

4. Love is the antidote for sin and for death:

- When a person inadvertently swallows poison, doctors administer a certain medicine to be taken without delay which neutralises the deadly effects of poison; we call this medicine “antidote.”

- In the second reading of this Sunday, taken from the second letter of Paul to the Christians of Corinth, Paul exhorts his Christian to be generous in contributing to a collection that was being made in all the churches to remedy the needs of the Christians in Palestine who were passing through a famine.

Paul recalls to his Christians the generosity of Jesus: “Remember how generous the Lord was: he was rich, but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty” (2 Cor. 8: 9).

- Jesus did not come into the world to distribute money or possessions but to dispense life. He himself tells us in the Gospel of John: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn. 10: 10). To give us life, he lost his own; to make us rich, he became poor.

- Sin destroys love, love between God and man, which is what true life is. Love instead destroys sin, and destroys death, by bringing in true life. There is no better weapon to overcome both spiritual and natural death than love, love for our brothers.

Saint John knew what he meant when he wrote: “If you refuse to love, you are still under the power of death” (1 Jn. 3: 14); and again: “Anyone who truly loves (his brothers), lives in God and God lives in him” (1 Jn. 4: 16)

Let us love our brothers without measuring the cost, as Christ loved us; life will be ours, and we shall have nothing to fear from death.

“Death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:55-56).

Let us pray: Father, we thank you for having brought us back from death into life. May the life in the Spirit grow in us throughout life, till at our death we may place our souls into your loving hands. Amen.