

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

# Reflections at the Tomb of Lazarus

The Gospel of last Sunday is a prelude to Easter. It pictures Jesus encountering in his friend Lazarus the grim reality that he was soon to face in his own life — the inevitability of death. As we think of the Lazarus Gospel and look forward to the memorial of Jesus' death, it is well for us to face honestly the reality and inevitability of death as it affects us: the death of our loved ones and, finally, our own death.



Death puts our faith to the supreme test. It forces us to ask the deepest faith-question of all: is death ultimate or penultimate? Is it the last thing in human existence or is it the next to the last? Does death write the conclusion to human fulfillment or is it a step across a horizon to where we find perfect human fulfillment? The deepest faith-question of all put in the most personal terms is the question: Is there life after death for us? Do our loved ones survive? Shall we see them again? Shall we survive after death? Is there a heaven?

These questions that force themselves so readily upon us are not answered by the raising of Jesus. While the raising of Lazarus by Jesus is a prelude to the raising of Jesus by the Father, yet the two resurrections are, literally, worlds apart. The raising of Lazarus meant a return to this world and to an existence that was mortal. The raising of Jesus was not a return to this world but a going beyond: he enters a whole new world of reality, an existence that is immortal. Lazarus' raising thwarts death, but only for a time: he must die again. Jesus' raising thwarts death for all times: He could never experience death again.

This is the faith we have — a faith that we shall reaffirm on Easter. We cannot prove it; we can only receive it, experience it and accept it. Faith in this way is like love. Love cannot be proved either. It is like growing up in a family and discovering that love is there. You don't prove it. You receive it, you experience it, you return it,



A Cross Bearing Christ Triumphant over Death (Northern Italy, 1190-1200)

and it makes life worthwhile.

In the final analysis, we believe in heaven, believe that our loved ones will survive and that we will survive, believe that death is only penultimate and that eternal survival and fulfillment are ultimate — because we believe in Jesus. It is only living faith in Jesus and his resurrection that makes it possible for us to believe in heaven. We cannot experience heaven, because we have not been THERE; but we can experience Jesus because He is HERE. This is what Jesus means when He says to Martha:

*"I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die."*

Because we experience Jesus here, in this life, we

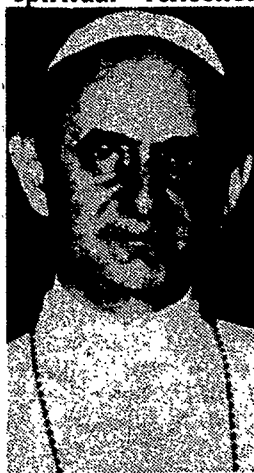
*"I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die."*

have the assurance that we shall experience Him there, in the life to come. That is why finding time for prayer and reflection in our lives is so important; for it is in these moments that we can experience Jesus, know that He lives and, because He does, that we will, too. That is why our Sunday Eucharist is so important. We go, not primarily because we have an obligation to do so, but because here in the community of fellow-believers we can experience that Jesus is alive and in our midst; and because He lives we know that His promise of eternal life is true. That is why belonging to the Church is so important for us. For belonging to the Church means being united to a community of Easter people who believe that Jesus rose from the dead, who believe that He lives eternally and, therefore, believe what He says about eternal life. That is why the last words of the Creed are so deep an expression of our faith: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

## Lent: A Time to Build 'Self Mastery'

Following are excerpts from Pope Paul's address Wednesday, Feb. 22.

As you know, the Church attaches particular importance to the liturgical period in which we find ourselves and which is called Lent. The thought that occupies the brief moment of spiritual reflection for our weekly General Audience, cannot stray from this religious subject which, very reduced in disciplinary requirements, still characterizes this preparation for the paschal solemnities as an important period, rich in liturgical themes.



We will limit ourself to giving a glance at the religious and moral itinerary which the spirit of Lent can still have for our Christian education.

Well, today, we propose to you to try with an act of good, of conscious will, to enter the spirit of Lent and to make it an exercise involving energy and asceticism. We wish to be strong and consistent Christians. Lent is precisely a school of Christian fortitude. So we ask you, as well as all those whom the echo of this very simple talk may reach, to change in your opinion, if there should be need, the common idea about Lent, as if it were a period of mournful and sad spirituality. That the penance it imposes on those who wish to follow its path is marked by serious thoughts, and demands some observances which are not pleasant, everyone knows. But when it is inspired by Christ's love for us, it cannot give rise in our hearts to depressed and discouraging feelings, though indeed of sincere humility, but to feelings full of courage and almost foretasting the reward which awaits it, peace and joy-of-spirit. In the resolution of the Prodigal Son,

*"Christian repentance can be compared to physical exercise of gymnastics, tiring . . . but strengthening."*

courageously determined to go to his father's house, there already vibrates a strength of mind which, even subjectively considered, will have to lead to a strengthening feeling of interior renewal. "I will arise and go;" with these words the prodigal retraces his wasted steps which have now become steps of redemption.

You see, Christian repentance can be compared to a physical exercise of gymnastics, tiring, it is true, but strengthening. Christian penance is a spiritual exercise, which calls for some effort, but it is not depressing, not humiliating. We can, being content with an elementary but essential analysis, concentrate the process of Christian repentance on three points.

In biblical language it is described with a fundamental word, now in current use, which in Greek is "metanoia" and means: conversion, change of direction; like a vigorous twist of the rudder, which changes direction and the course followed. This is the most important point and, if studied psychologically, it has nothing depressing about it; on the contrary it is a sign of maturing of thought and of a new strength of personal will.

Then, a second point, more difficult both in the maturing conscience and in objective evaluation; it is awareness of moral evil of which one has been guilty. It is awareness of sin. This implies a terrible warning, which the moral superficiality of people does not admit, whereas it is a real and essential part of the moral order, that moral order which

has been violated. Our life, as free, responsible men, is connected existentially with the eye of God, with his direct judgement, with his goodness requiring the observance of an immanent moral obligation; an observance that marks the oscillation of the fatal pointer between good and evil, between the just and good action and its contrary which bears the name of sin, ignored by so many people today, yet fatal.

Sin is a violation of an immanent and transcendent relationship, the relationship of man with God; it is an offense to God, to reason, to the order demanded by circumstances and by the situation. St. Augustine coined a definition, which survives even today: "Sin is a fact, or a saying, or a desire against the eternal law. The eternal law is a divine thought, or a will of God, which orders that natural order should be preserved or forbids upsetting it."

The study becomes as interesting as it is difficult. Let it be enough for us to recall the ontological repercussion that our actions have on the screen, always taut and infallible, of the divine gaze. God sees. God remembers. God judges. This is a real situation, from which we can never escape: "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?" This is the most delicate and tremendous aspect for the human conscience, and constitutes one of the most common but most serious and also most consoling and strengthening chapters of human action.

Yes, for all this ethico-spiritual pedagogy leads, as to its conclusion, to a great precept of the Christian art of the good life: that of self-mastery. An immense subject, of essential importance, to which this short excursion in the paths of our Lent leads us and leaves us. Let us be confident, let us be strong. We are on the right way, the way to Life, to Paschal Life.