

Homily for Colette's Funeral [21 December 2009]

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

"I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though they die they will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). These words were spoken on an occasion not too dissimilar to our own. For they were spoken to a woman called Martha on the death of her brother, when the Lord had come to be with her and her sister Mary. As the story unfolds we are told that, at the sight of Mary's tears, 'Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, "Where have you put him?"' And we are told 'Jesus wept.' So that all those with them said to one another, "See how much he loved him!" (John 11:32ff).

Today as we gather on this sad occasion we, too, weep. And the God-who-is-with-us, this Jesus in our midst, weeps with us. For he has said to us, "Where two or three meet in my name, I am there with them" (Matthew 18:20). We here gather in his name; he is with us. And he has come to be with us to weep with us, too. In fact, the tears we weep are his tears, and so in them we can know how greatly the Lord loves Colette. In the story of Martha and Mary we are told that, in the depth of his distress, his great love drove Jesus to raise their brother Lazarus from the dead. Knowing of his great love for Colette, who can doubt that the Lord is not saying to her, even now: "Colette, come forth!"

Colette was a great searcher for the truth; she was always wanting to question. She is of an age where her initial upbringing was in the 'old', pre-Vatican II Church. This Church was very sure of itself; it had all the answers, and so it brooked no questioning. This was problematic for a person like Colette, for whom the standard answers were not always adequate. So for a time Colette wandered far away from things Church. But Colette did not just walk away. She clung to her experience of the God she knew and kept asking her questions, till she could find her way back to Church and find her place in it. Her example has much to teach us.

Let me tell you of a little incident that Colette once shared with me, which lets us see a glimpse of the God she knew. To appreciate the story we need to recall that from the David and Colette's backyard there is a marvellous view, which looks out and over and into the distance.

There is much greenery to be seen, framed by distant hills. Well one day Colette was out gardening. She had just finished working on this garden bed and was feeling so pleased with her efforts that she spontaneously lifted up her eyes to heaven and said, "Look, God! Look what I have done for you!" But as she raised her eyes, they took in that lovely view and she heard God saying, "Look Colette! Look what I have done for you!" Such was Colette's God, a God who was intimate and close, and a God who loved her. Colette could not stay away from such a God, and so she kept on her quest and kept on questioning, always seeking to bring her understanding into line with her experience.

Because of her upbringing Colette's questioning always troubled her; she felt she risked being branded a heretic. But her questions were really no different to all our questions, and which humankind has been asking from the beginning: Who am I? What's life all about? Why suffering? Why death? An inkling of an answer to these questions is to be found in the Scriptures, and especially in those stories of Creation and The Fall at the beginning of the Bible in the *Book of Genesis*. These are stories that are not true; they are stories. But they are stories in which, or through which, we can see the truth. That's why our forebears sought to hang onto them from time immemorial and pass them onto us. In these simple, perhaps naive, little stories we learn that God made us and looked at what he had done and saw it was very good. One can almost hear this God saying to us in Adam and Eve, "Look what I have done for you!" and feel the joy and pleasure this God takes in us. These stories tell us that we are made in the image and likeness of God; we are made to be like God. The wonder of it! But, as we ponder this, a dark cloud comes over to ruin our wonder, as our own shortcomings push their way into our consciousness and we have to admit, if only to ourselves: "But I am not like God!" 'For to will goods works is present in me, but to do them is not. I do not do the good I want to do, but I practice the evil I do not want,' as St Paul put it (Romans 7:18-19). Thus we come to the story of The Fall: We want to be good and do good, but we do not always do it. So, in the presence of the good God, like our father Adam whose children we are (John 8:44), we want to run away and hide our shame (Genesis 3:8). In this little story of The Fall we begin to wrestle with the problem of evil in our world.

In this story we learn that the evil in our world, which we usually call as sin, is largely the result of what we do, or fail to do, to one another. How true this is! So this story, then, in its own simple way, goes on to tell us

that all the world's hardships, all its suffering, and even death itself, stem from this act we refer to as The Fall. But sin's principal consequence is that of alienation: alienation from God, but manifested in our alienation from one another. We can see here why death was included in the list, for if nothing else, it seems to place a huge gulf between us and our loved one, a chasm impossible to cross. We feel this 'sinfulness' when, to our astonishment, we find in the midst of our sorrow an anger that cries out to our beloved: 'Why have you done this, causing me so much pain, and leaving me to bear it all alone? How could you?' And we feel hurt by them — as if this, too, was their doing.

For us Christians, the final story, about ourselves and our place in the world, is the story of Jesus. For his is a story of reconciliation, and so a story of hope by which we might live in a world beset by evil. In a sense, Jesus came to bridge the gulf between ourselves and God, and so end our alienation: this is the Good News. Thus his is a story of forgiveness of all we have done. Thus his story is studded with reports of his curing people of all kinds of sickness. For in these, forgiveness is seen to overcome the consequence of our sin (Matthew 9:1-8). So 'the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life' (Luke 7:22). His miracles, then, are not stories of some Wonder-Worker, but are really better seen as acted out parables that proclaim the forgiveness he came to bring about. Their principal effect is not so much the cure, as the cleansing of the person's sinfulness, which enabled them to take their place again in the worshipping community (Luke 5:14; 17:14) and so end their alienation from God and from one another; they are stories of forgiveness (Luke 7:15. Also 1 Kings 17:23; Acts 9:41).

So, what are we to make of death in light of this Good News? Well, we have all sinned and been sinned against. So we have all experienced forgiveness — from both sides. So we know forgiveness does not change what has happened: what was done is done; it is not somehow magically undone. What forgiveness does is make possible life together AFTER what was done. So it is with forgiveness and death. Stories of Jesus' resurrection do not alter what was done to him (Luke 24:39; John 20:24ff), but they show us that life together after death is possible — but in a new way: 'life is changed, not ended.' One such story tells how they recognised Jesus present with them in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:31). Shortly we will gather round the Lord's Table and break the bread. In this we will recognise Jesus present here with us, too,

breaking the same bread. Colette, too, sat at this same Table, ate of this same bread and drank of this same cup: there is only one bread, one cup and one Lord. In a real sense, then, she is still here with us, still in communion with us, still sitting here at this same Table, for there is only one Table of the Lord. In the Lord, we remain in communion forever with all who have ever sat together with the Lord at his table. For there is ever only one Table of the Lord — stretching on into eternity, with that multitude-yet-to-come just waiting yet to be served. In this we can see how Scripture can say that ours is a God, not of the dead, but only of the living (Mark 12:27).

We can go on and do go on together, then, but in a new way: 'life is changed, not ended.' This is a truth we can see in the story of Jesus. Let me finish with those same words of his that I started with, that he said to the woman who had said to him in her distress, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." "I am the resurrection," said Jesus. "If anyone believes in me, even though they die they will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

As I sat writing this homily, I had the distinct feeling that I was sitting one more time with Colette, chatting with her about all the things she liked to talk about. Well, I guess now all her questions are answered and she can rest in peace. Farewell, my friend! I shall miss you.