

Last August I was vacationing with four of my priest friends. We celebrate mass every morning in the place we stay. One day I was vested, sitting waiting to begin and a younger priest was just stepping into his Alb behind me when he looked down on me from above and said, with surprise in his voice, “Wow! You are going bald. Your hair’s falling out. Why am I hanging around a bunch of fossils? I need new friends – you are going to be dead pretty soon.” I thanked him for his observation – yep – the hair is falling out. And we are all mortal.

In that context, let me recommend another book, Leo Tolstoy’s novella, The Death of Ivan Ilyich. If you want to read something by Tolstoy, but War and Peace seems a bit too long, try this story. It’s only about 50 pages long, but it’s a classic. It’s the story of a middle-aged Russian bureaucrat in the 1800s, Ivan Ilyich, confronting death. He lived a life he thought of as full of “pleasantness and decency.” But then he falls one day and injures himself. At first it seemed like nothing, but the pain persisted. Eventually he went to see a doctor – then many doctors,

until his life was no longer pleasant. “It was impossible to deceive himself: something dreadful, new, and so significant that nothing more significant had ever happened in his life, was being accomplished in Ivan Ilyich. And he alone knew of it. Everyone around him either did not understand or did not want to understand and thought that everything in the world was going on as before.”

Tolstoy paints a gripping and convincing picture of the slowly dawning realization in Ivan’s mind of the horrible truth. “In the depths of his soul Ivan Ilyich knew he was dying, but not only was he not accustomed to it, he simply did not, he could not possibly understand it . . . The example of a syllogism he had studied in . . . logic – Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal – had seemed to be correct only in relation to Caius, but by no means to himself . . . he had always been quite, quite separate from all other beings.”

It’s a bracing story to read as one goes bald. As the all the stage markers of aging come true in my life – balding, decreasing strength,

balance, memory – how can I think the last point – death – is not approaching, as well?

In today's gospel Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. In doing so Jesus addresses the biggest question of all – death. Ivan Ilyich spent his pleasant, decent life avoiding that question – until it found him. We can do the same thing. But while we might not be interested in death, death is interested in us. And here's one truth to take away from the gospel today – Jesus is going to let me die! And Jesus is going to let you die too – just as He let Ivan Ilyich die and let His good friend Lazarus die. Yes, Jesus weeps, but He will let us die.

If we haven't looked at that reality in the face – we must. I know that's not a pleasant topic to speak of – not decent. But we're all facing the question anyway. And it's the most important question of all. Some scripture scholars believe that it's the raising of Lazarus from the dead that pushes the High Priests and Romans to move against Jesus. A man who controls death can't be ignored! People are going to follow any

leader who has the answer to that horrible question of death -- if he's not stopped.

What are we to do about death? Here is why Jesus' tears matter. He weeps in the face of death. This story of the raising of Lazarus is from John 11, just as Jesus gets to Jerusalem and faces His own death on the cross. His tears are for all of us who are going to die, including Himself. Ivan Ilyich is right. Death is horrible.

But Jesus brings Good News precisely because He offers us a way through the terrible truth that we are all, like Ivan Ilyich, facing an imminent death. I'm always begging you to devote 20 minutes a day to prayer, the serious practice of meditative prayer. And remember this Lent's book – Practicing the Presence of God? The goal is to enter the stage of the spiritual life when Jesus takes over prayer. That is called "infused contemplation." Infused contemplation is Jesus pouring His life into our souls, until we are filled with the fullness of God.

Why is that important? Because that is heaven – and it can start now – on this side of death. And it means that we can lose the fear of death before it happens. Ivan Ilyich is tortured by anxiety, despair, and darkness as his life slips away. Wouldn't it be worth all the efforts of the spiritual life to be free of those fears? To find that, as our death, like Ivan Ilyich's, inevitably approaches, we're neither surprised by death, nor afraid of it, as he was. In fact, for saints, death is the welcome doorway to the heaven and the Savior they have grown to know as real and present over the years. Don't you want that?

Jesus is going to let original sin take its course. We will each die. He weeps for us as the only other Person who will really understand what we are each going through that moment as we die, because He alone knows how significant each life and death is. But Jesus will still let us die, probably sooner than we think. But Jesus knows there is something beautiful beyond the grave. He's been there. He is there. And we can live something of that heaven's life – even now, by allowing

Him to fill our lives. But that won't happen in a day, or a week, or a month, or even a year. It means a sustained seeking of Christ as our first priority in life. The answer to the question of death is Jesus. Let us take away the fear of our own death by living for Christ completely, starting now, so as to be able to welcome Him when He calls us.