

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

*Gospel: John 11:1-45*

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the

crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

## **REFLECTION 1: THE RAISING OF LAZARUS**

The story of the raising of Lazarus is the third of the great Lenten Gospels designed to prepare candidates for baptism at Easter. Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus whose sisters Mary and Martha must often have offered hospitality to Jesus at their home at Bethany near Jerusalem. Now he had fallen gravely ill and friends called on Jesus to heal him but Lazarus dies before Jesus arrives. Then when he does come, Lazarus has been buried for four days. So Jesus orders the stone to be removed from the tomb and calls on Lazarus, now wrapped in his burial clothes to grope forth.

The outline of the story is quite simple but the evangelist John adds on a number of delaying techniques. One of these is the sense of misunderstanding; Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus’ sickness is ‘not unto death’. Meaning that his illness won’t lead to death. The disciples presume that Jesus was just referring to mortal life, while John and Jesus understand something else. The evangelist calls it ‘eternal life’; it is the only life worth living as it is the life of God. John now slows down the action by entering into a debate with the disciples about security – would it be safe to go back to Jerusalem simply to ‘wake’ Lazarus from sleep; while Mary ponders over the prospect of resurrection.

The raising of Lazarus looks forward to the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, when the disciples will find the stone over Jesus’ burial place already removed and will find the shroud and bandages neatly wrapped and laid aside. Now at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus will call on the bystanders to unbind Lazarus and to let him go free. Like Lazarus in the tomb, we Christians are on our pilgrim way, striving to go forward towards a resurrected life. Now we need our brothers and sisters in the community to unbind us and let us go free, free from the small and big things that imprison us – the dead deeds and unwholesome memories, resentments and traces of failure to forgive.

What John the Evangelist is interested in is not so much Jesus the miracle worker, but Jesus the one who has come into the world to bring people to faith in himself as the Son of Man. That is still the task that the Church continues through her mission and her liturgy. Pope Francis says that he invites all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; ‘I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day’.

## **REFLECTION 2: LIBERATED FROM DEATH THE PROBLEM OF PAIN**

One of the greatest problems we have in our society today is that of pain and suffering. Why could a God who is so loving, merciful and compassionate, permit people who are entirely innocent, to suffer pain and affliction. We were reminded of this recently in the wake of the tragic loss of four Coast Guard crew members off the coast of Mayo and the subsequent trauma inflicted on their loved ones, families and friends. I believe that it is important that we Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, shouldn't look to the Scriptures for pat answers to all our problems in life. Rather we should look to the Bible as a whole to give us perspectives, guidelines on our present-day problems. For instance, none of us would be so naive as to expect instant solutions to our national problems, such as hospital overcrowding, gridlock on our motorways, waste disposal. There are no potted solutions to any of these problems and so it is with the Word of God in relation to pain and suffering. Not only have we to cope with the experience of suffering, yet we have to reconcile the fact of suffering with our faith.

We refer to God as our 'Abba' (Daddy in Aramaic) and we are told that we can trust him because he loves us. Today's Gospel story is about human suffering. A home was broken by death and hearts were broken in sorrow. Jesus was there and his involvement offers some insight into the mystery of God and human

suffering. For one thing, it reminds us that God permits suffering. We need to realise that the snuffing out of human life is not God's will. The most we can say about the source of human suffering is that God permits it. God in fact shares in our suffering. When Jesus saw the grief of Martha and Mary, we are told that he was 'troubled in spirit and moved with compassion'. Then it adds this meaningful sentence: 'Jesus wept'. It reminds us that our lives are not at the receiving end of a cold, impersonal fate. The tears of Jesus tell us about a warm, personal and caring God, who is intimately involved in the lives of his children. 'Jesus wept', he shared the sorrow of his friends and the heartbreaks of all of us through all ages. Our Christian faith does not offer a complete explanation to the mystery of suffering, but it does offer the power to endure it, to overcome it, and to use it for good.