

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT: March 29th, 2020

CHRIST, THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. **John 11:1-45**

In today's Gospel we see a scene with which all of us are familiar, namely, people weeping over the death of a loved one. Jesus is at the center of that scene. He is the one who gives hope to those who are surrounded by the shadows of death.

A little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom. The little boy turned to her mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark. The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark, dear," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protects you." The little boy looked at the mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure he's out there?" "Yes, I'm sure, Mom Said!. He is everywhere, and he is always ready t help you when you need him," she said. little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little. **"Jesu If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"**

In two weeks we will recall the death of Jesus, (**Good Friday**) but today we are confronted with the death of Lazarus. It seems we're being asked to think about what we would prefer not to think about: death. And to ponder the little boy's question, **"Jesus are you out there in the dark?" Really?**

The little boy's question, "Jesus, are you out there?" must have been Lazarus' question. The Good News is that he was: for Lazarus, for you, for me. We must FIRST and foremost remember that : We are not alone Everybody needs friends — even Jesus. In the village of Bethany Jesus had three very special friends — the sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. Their house remained open to him when many other houses were being closed against him.

When Lazarus got sick, it was only natural that the first one the two sisters should turn to for help was Jesus. They sent an urgent message to him, couched in language calculated to appeal to his heart. It said simply, ***'Lord, the man you love is ill.'*** Their hope was that he would drop everything and come and cure him. But surprisingly Jesus did not drop everything and rush to the bedside of his dying friend. Instead he stayed on where he was for two whole days. We don't know why. His delay in coming must have been heartbreaking for the sisters. Right in front of their eyes their brother's life was ebbing away. And the one they believed could do something about it wasn't there.

So what can we do? We must try to imitate Martha. The story presents her as a model of faith. In her hour of grief, she ran to the Lord and poured out her sorrow to him. And when he challenged her to believe, she made a wonderful profession of faith: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world Well, Lazarus died. The Gospel shows the desolation his death caused to Martha and Mary... While they had sympathetic people around them, the one they most wanted to be with them was not there. Jesus, their friend and the friend of Lazarus, was absent. And when he finally came, they suggested that he could have prevented this death 'Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.'

The desolation experienced by Martha and Mary is one many of us have experienced. And when something bad happens to us or to a loved one, **we can't help thinking that if God really cared about us, if he really loved us, then he wouldn't have allowed this thing to happen.** We feel abandoned by God. **We feel he has left us alone.**

What we have to do then is to turn to God. Neither a good life, nor a close relationship with God, will necessarily save a person from a tragic death. In the face of our pain all we can do is commend ourselves to God, and abandon ourselves to his care.

During these difficult days of CoronaVirus; (COVID-19) where we are going through hardships, and at times feel helpless and powerless, let us turn to the wonderful friend Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus goes around doing things in a big way and then saying lots of very big and very complicated things about them. He starts out in the Gospel turning water into wine and now, by the time we get to today's Gospel, he is turning death into life!

I am glad two things occur in today's Gospel which give me another insight into the Jesus who is described by John. First, Jesus describes Lazarus as **his friend** as mentioned above and **later we are told Jesus wept.**

To be a friend means to be willing to share with another a common life, to support and be supported. It seems clear from John's Gospel that Lazarus and his sisters had been a source of comfort to Jesus. It was at their home he found hospitality and rest from the bustle of the crowds and the hostility of those who did not understand him. Now here was an opportunity to return the favors of the loving care of that house in Bethany. Not only would he be able to bring Lazarus back to life, but, by that event, Lazarus would become the means by which others would see God was working through the ministry of Jesus. Lazarus would become a living, walking testimony to the power of God in Jesus Christ.

To weep means to identify with another's pain and sorrow and to admit it as our own. When Jesus wept beside the tomb of Lazarus he was weeping with every person who has ever lost a loved one to the power of death. A few weeks ago when we heard the story of the temptation, we emphasized that that event meant Jesus could understand the weakness of each man and woman. Now we learn Jesus knows our grief and suffers the pain of loss as we do. These words assure us that the Jesus who makes those magnificent claims about himself throughout John's Gospel is not simply some divine being set apart from us, but he is one of us. God is a human being! Or, as John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The Gospels record three times Jesus wept. Each time tells us something about his identification with humanity.

The first time was that of the circumcision. Granted, the Scripture does not say, in as many words, that Jesus wept, but I think one can make the assumption. Jesus feels the pain of the human flesh for the first time. The ancient fathers used to make great comparisons between this shedding of his blood the first time under the law, and the final shedding of his blood to fulfil the law completely. We are not as impressed with those kind of images today, but we should not neglect to remind ourselves Jesus understands our frustration with all the do's and do not's of this life because he was himself subject to law and its consequences.

The other time Jesus wept was over the city of Jerusalem. He wept because of the conspiracy of human sin and human ignorance that would not see, in him, the fulfillment of God's law. It was this conspiracy that would finally bring him to his death.

Jesus weeps because he understands the weakness of human flesh. He weeps because our ignorance turns us from him. And, finally, he weeps at the tomb of Lazarus. He weeps as a friend. He weeps as one who knows our sorrow and the harsh depth of its reality.

Because Jesus was human he wept. Because he was the Son of God he restored Lazarus to life. In the same way Jesus calls us friends and meets us in our need. He is the Resurrection and the Life as much for us as for Lazarus. How sad it is when we do not remind ourselves of the presence of this friend each week as we come to Holy Communion! How sad many congregations neglect to have the Eucharist each week! It is like saying to Jesus, "Yes, we want you to be our friend, but if you are around too much, we might get tired of you."

Christ comes to us in the Eucharistic banquet, just as he came to Lazarus and Mary and Martha and ate at their home. He comes as a friend. He comes in the ordinary objects of life, in bread and wine. In the offertory we give God the bread and wine, and God returns it to us as a dynamic reminder of the living presence of Christ in the world. This is not simply a pious hope that we may live beyond the grave. It is God's assurance to us eternal life has begun now, now in our baptism, and the Holy Communion is the food which nourishes that eternal life within us.

Mr. John Wesley (English cleric and theologian) referred to the Holy Communion as "an antepast of heaven." That word ought to have a slightly familiar ring to people who eat in Italian restaurants. It is the same word as antipasto. It is the first course of the meal, if you will. In other words, we know the banquet has already begun. It may be a kind of progressive dinner, such as the youth fellowship delights in holding, but the dinner has begun. Eternal life has started now! In Holy Communion the One who is the Resurrection and the Life assures us we are participating in it.

Do not be deceived by those who try to tell you our life here is only a preparation for eternity, getting ready to take the final examination to see if we will graduate into Pearly Gates University. The water has already been changed into wine by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Eternal life has begun for us now.

Of course, that does not mean we will be excused from facing death. Lazarus wasn't. He had been revived, but he had not been resurrected. The early preachers used to see great symbolism in the fact that Lazarus came out of the grave still in his burial clothes. They understood that to mean Lazarus would have to face death again. But this time he would be facing death with a difference. The difference would be Christ had gone before him and cleared the way, had gone to prepare a place for him.

When people get baptized on Easter Day in many parts of the world, they are reminded that they die in baptism. That is what going under the water means (**immersion**). But they are also raised in baptism. That's why the priest or deacon take them out! Eternal life with Christ will have begun for them.

You may know his presence in a special way each week as you meet him at the Lord's Table. Like Lazarus, we still have to face a physical death. But we will face it equipped with the knowledge that Christ will continue to walk with us through that door as he has faithfully walked with us through all the days of our earthly tour. No wonder we can sing, *"What a Friend We Have in Jesus!"*