

## **Bible reading, reflection and prayers**

**March 29<sup>th</sup> 2020 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**

### **Gospel reading: John 11: 1-44 The death and raising of Lazarus**

**11** Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,<sup>[a]</sup> “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus<sup>[b]</sup> was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin,<sup>[c]</sup> said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

### **Jesus the Resurrection and the Life**

<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus<sup>[d]</sup> had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles<sup>[e]</sup> away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>[f]</sup> Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,<sup>[g]</sup> the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

### **Jesus Weeps**

<sup>28</sup>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.” <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>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.” <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus

began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

## Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

<sup>39</sup>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.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>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.”

### Reflection

And so we have entered a period of ‘lockdown’. The very word ‘lockdown’ sounds ominous doesn’t it? It carries with it a sense of foreboding. And at present, this new reality appears endless – we don’t know when or how it will be lifted. But I think we know that it won’t be any time soon. Watching, listening to, or reading the news is becoming a feat of endurance as we wait for grim daily updates in our own country and from around the world.

And amidst this, here we are as Church. Here we are in crisis, watching the world reel and respond in ways most of us have never experienced before. Here we are in the latter stages of Lent, at the fifth Sunday marker, with the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

On some levels this story is a hard one.

On some levels, we might not understand everything that’s going on in this story. I don’t understand why Jesus dawdles when he first receives word of Lazarus’s illness. I don’t understand why he allows his friends to suffer for the sake of ‘God’s glory.’ I don’t understand why he sidesteps Martha’s accusation: ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ And I don’t understand why Lazarus virtually disappears from the Gospel narrative once his graveclothes fall off. Why is he never heard from again?

In many ways, the story is shrouded in mystery. But I wonder if there are two things we can understand in this story that might particularly resonate with us at this time. The first appears in verse 35 when we are told that Jesus wept. For us, this could be the heart of the story as we live through the Covid-19 crisis: that grief takes hold of God and breaks him down. That Jesus stands at the grave of his friend and cries. I wonder if we can cherish Jesus’s tears right now, perhaps even more than we can marvel at the miracle that follows them. Here are some of the reasons why:

***When Jesus weeps, he says to us it’s okay to be sad and grieve ourselves.*** His brokenness in the face of Mary and Martha’s sorrow shows us that at times it is appropriate for us to lament. Yes, resurrection is around the corner, but in this story, the promise of joy doesn’t cancel out the grief. When Jesus cries, he assures Mary and Martha, not only that their beloved brother is worth crying for, but also that they are worth crying with. When one suffers we all suffer, when one is sad we share in that sadness too.

***When Jesus weeps, he acknowledges the complexity of our sorrows and joys.*** Raising Lazarus would not bring back the past. It would not cancel out the pain of his final illness, the memory of saying goodbye to a life he loved, or the gaping absence his sisters felt when he died. Whatever joys awaited his family in the future would be layered joys, shaped by the sorrows, fears, and losses they'd just endured. In Lazarus's case, his future would be nothing like his past. Forever afterwards, he'd be known in his village as the One Who Returned. Perhaps that bizarre fact would make him a hero. Perhaps it would make him a pariah. Either way, life would be new and strange and scary. Jesus's tears honour the reality of human change and the journey of life lived: he grieves because things will never be the same again.

***When Jesus weeps, he offers tears rather than words.*** Sometimes there is nothing to be said in the face of loss; sometimes tears are our best language. There is always the temptation to rush to words, even with the best of intentions, we can sometimes feel an urgent need to wrap other people's pain in platitudes, Bible verses, condolences, promises. Through his wordless tears, Jesus cautions us to pause. He shows us that silence can be love too.

***Jesus weeps and so we are free to weep; to mourn; to acknowledge loss and sorrow in the situation we find ourselves in.***

The second thing we can take from this story is in verse 25 when Jesus says ***'I am the resurrection and the life'***. I've found myself pondering this week why Jesus makes this statement when he does in the sequence of the story as John tells it. We have been told that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days! That's even longer than Jesus was in the tomb! And here is Jesus in the middle of this very hopeless and desperate situation saying ***'I am the resurrection and the life'***.

On the one hand, that appears odd to me. I can't help thinking that Jesus would have been better saving this punchline for the end of the story after Lazarus is brought out of the cave and unbound and freed. And yet, the fact that Jesus makes this statement when he does reminds each one of us that amidst the most difficult and challenging of circumstances, Jesus can be found uttering words of hope amidst despair and words of reassurance amidst great uncertainty. Jesus says 'I am the resurrection and the life' because those words can still resound in our hearts and be known to be true, despite the situation the world finds itself in.

It feels a little ironic that just as lockdown is enforced, the weather turns to spring. It has been a week of glorious sunshine, blue skies, a cool breeze, and creation is showing signs of new life. Birds are singing, blossom is appearing and daffodils are dancing in my garden. But maybe this in itself is a reminder that life is in our midst if we are able to see it and appreciate it. Similarly too in the acts of kindness that are beginning to filter through in our communities reminds us that love and goodness is bringing life-giving hope and care to people in need.

A few days ago I was sent the meditation below 'Lockdown' written by a Franciscan friar in response to the global health emergency. It speaks for itself and seeks to remind us that amidst tears and grief there are signs of resurrection and life too.

## Lockdown

Yes, there is fear.

Yes, there is isolation.

Yes, there is panic buying.

Yes, there is sickness.

Yes, there is even death.

But, they say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise, you can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet, the sky is no longer thick with fumes but blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi people are singing to each other across the empty squares, keeping their windows open so that those who are alone may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know is busy spreading fliers with her number through the neighbourhood so that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples are preparing to welcome and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary.

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting.

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way.

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality.

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that

Yes, there is fear, but there does not have to be hate.

Yes, there is isolation, but there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes, there is panic buying, but there does not have to be meanness.

Yes, there is sickness, but there does not have to be disease of the soul.

Yes, there is even death, but there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen.

Behind the factory noises of your panic the birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

Spring is coming

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul and though you may not be able to touch across the empty square, sing.

Fr. Richard Hendrick, OFM

## **Prayers**

Holy and loving God,  
Gentle, yet mighty  
Lowly, yet almighty  
Refugee, yet King.  
In your power, strengthen us.  
In your gentleness, guide us.  
In your lowliness take away our selfish pride.  
In your grace, forgive us.  
In your majesty enable us to lift ourselves up so that others might see you in your full glory.

As a shepherd, watch over us,  
As the King call us to be your royal priesthood  
God who is our shepherd and King  
Christ who was put to death and rose on the third day  
Spirit who comforts and empowers  
God that is three in one, be present in our devotions, and forever in our lives.  
Amen.

## **Intercessions**

Gracious God, we come to you with all our troubles and burdens...

We call to mind all that has been on our heart this week...

Our friends, family and neighbours...

Those who have served us, supported us and helped us...

Those who we might never meet yet are there in the caring professions if we need them...

We pray for those who are struggling with their new situation...

We pray for ourselves as we look for a new rhythm, a new purpose, a new daily routine.  
Grant us dear Lord your strength in these troubled times.  
For we offer you our prayers in the name of Jesus, our friend, our saviour and our guide.  
Amen.

## **Blessing**

God of the wilderness places, journey with us into this coming week, we pray.  
Inspire and uplift each one of us,  
to seek your kingdom come,  
your will be done, in our lives and throughout your world.  
Amen.