

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent, 3/29/2020

As we continue to live under strict regulations to avoid contact with others to prevent the spread of coronavirus, our Gospel reading for mass this Sunday gives us the good news that Jesus is the Resurrection and the life. Today we also meet one of the most fascinating and unique persons in all the Gospels —Lazarus — a man who was dead and buried for four days and returned to life. If this happened today he would be the story of the day on CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, etc.

Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary are dear and close friends of Jesus. Lazarus becomes ill and dies. Jesus hears the news of his demise yet delays for two days and arrives four days after the fact. Jesus weeps at the grave, orders the tomb to be opened and Lazarus be unbound and set free. Unlike in the Gospel stories of the last two weeks when we heard the words of the Samaritan woman at the well and the words of the man born blind Lazarus is totally silent. Interestingly, he doesn't even utter a word of thanks to Jesus for restoring his life. Why is Lazarus speechless? It is not because he is flabbergasted and too stunned to be alive again. No, John, the author of this Gospel, wants the spotlight to be totally on Jesus alone. Jesus is the central figure of this episode!

This account of Lazarus returning to life is a preparation for us to ponder the events of the next two weeks — namely of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. We know that Lazarus on his own account would never have come forth from the grave so he need not speak. It is better that Lazarus remain silent in order that we can better hear the words of Jesus in particular, three sets of words which I want to develop in this homily.

First, Jesus announces: "*Lazarus is dead. He is not asleep.*" Jesus calls a spade, a spade. Jesus will now go on to speak about resurrection and life. To do so, he waits to see Lazarus four days after he hears of his death in order to make very clear to Martha, Mary and to us the fact that Lazarus is clearly dead. Jesus then teaches that the road to resurrection and life is through death. Let us recall the words used on Ash Wednesday when we began Lent with ashes

marking our foreheads: *“Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”* Lent is a perfect time for us to reflect and pray seriously about the fact that we are born to die! Yet our faith tells us we shall live forever in heaven with the Lord.

Second, Jesus announces: *“I am the resurrection and the life!”* With these words the sting and fear of death is taken away. How is this possible? St. Paul tells us: *“If the spirit of God who raised Jesus dwells in you, then the God who raised Jesus will bring your mortal bodies to life.”* How do we get this union with Jesus, the Risen Christ? We are united with Christ by our baptism when we were buried with Him in the water of the font and raised out of the font to begin our resurrected life. This means that although we will surely die, because we live in Jesus we will live forever. Do we not confess this every time we recite the Creed when we say: *“We believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting!”*

Third, Jesus announces: *“Lazarus come out and let him free!”* Jesus says these same words to us when He commands us to come out of the entombment of sin, apathy and fears and live in freedom. Our faith tells us there is only one Jesus Christ — the Risen and Everlasting one. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist we are united with Jesus. As our head is united to our own bodies so are we united to Jesus. Thus, the Risen Jesus is our claim to our own resurrection and eternal life. No one says this clearer than Martha: *“You are the resurrection and the life.” “Yes Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”*

Hence, the story of Lazarus today does three things for us: It gives us a model of faith, a model of hope and finally a deep trust in Jesus, our Savior. It is thus a perfect introduction to Holy Week and Easter.

Although due to the coronavirus quarantine we will not be able to do so as a community of worshippers, however, we should privately celebrate and contemplate the gift of our faith and the love that God has for each of us as we approach our high Holy Days. How? You can google the readings for this Sunday and prayerfully reflect on them.

