

5th Sunday of Lent

We have another Johannine masterpiece: The story of the raising of Lazarus. St. John is both a spiritual and literary genius. The details always matter with him.

We hear of a certain man named Lazarus, whose name means “*God helps*” or “*God has helped.*” He is lying ill in the town of Bethany, which means “*house of the afflicted*” or “*house of misery.*” We are meant to see something here in the meaning of these names.

This is another story about ALL of us who are in anyway afflicted, know misery, and are seeking the help of God. That means, of course, every one of us. You can see how we all live in Bethany; we all live in the house of the afflicted, whether it is physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological affliction. And we are all Lazarus, seeking the help of God.

Lazarus, as we heard, is the brother of Martha and Mary. And John clearly tells us in his Gospel that Jesus loved them all. And we are meant to identify with these three siblings who are friends of Jesus, the beloved of God. This is everybody. We are all the friends of God; Jesus loves everyone.

BUT, hearing that Lazarus is sick, Jesus oddly does not rush to his bedside. Rather, he waits for two days. We have all wondered and have been puzzled by this reaction of Our Lord. Why, when we are so obviously in pain, does God seem to delay? Why doesn't God just deal with our pain? We all, at some time or other, have wrestled with this question. I am Lazarus. I am looking for God's help. I am living Bethany, in the house of the afflicted. And here is God, here is Christ, who can help me, but he doesn't come. He delays.

Well, the answer comes—Jesus says: The Son of Man will be glorified through the illness and death of Lazarus.

Yeah...umm, okay...but that doesn't help me here too much. I am looking for God's help and He tells me that He will be glorified in this illness and death?

This must give us pause for reflection on these words of Christ. We need to understand how God will be glorified in this. What is God's glory? Throughout the Bible we find that “glory of God” is precisely God's life-giving quality. God is glorified in his great acts of love. That is why the great St. Irenaeus says: ***The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.***

And so, we must not despair here when Jesus says I am delaying, and that the sickness and death of Lazarus will be for my glory; because this means for our fullness of life. It will somehow benefit us all. Something of great power is going to be revealed here—precisely through the death of Lazarus.

We read in the Gospel that Jesus blithely announces to his disciples that Lazarus is asleep. When they register confusion about this, He tells them plainly: Lazarus is dead. Yet what he says originally about Lazarus being asleep is very important—because this whole story is about the NON-FINALITY of death. When viewed from a purely scientific or naturalistic standpoint, death, of course, is it. It's the end. It's absolute.

But, the hinge on which the whole story turns, when viewed from the standpoint of God, is that death is rather something like sleeping. It is a transitional state that leads to a greater and richer mode of existence. That is what this story and the whole of the New Testament hinges upon—this particular insight: that death is something like sleeping for those who have faith.

Upon his arrival in Bethany, Jesus discovers that Lazarus has been in his grave for four days. One could hardly imagine a clearer indication of the finality and irreversibility of death. What is being implied here is that no power, at least no power on earth, could ever bring him back from that condition.

Unless, of course, what??? Love, the Divine Love, is more powerful than death. Remember now the importance of Jesus' love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The only power greater than the power of death is the Divine Love with which Christ loves Lazarus (and loves us ALL).

We hear that Martha runs out to meet Jesus, while Mary stays at home. This fits well for these sisters from what we know from the other Gospel accounts. Martha is more of a person of action and Mary more of a person of contemplation. So we see them here in their true form.

Martha expresses her great confidence in Jesus. "**Even now,**" she says, "**I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.**" Her words reveal that she hasn't quite yet completely grasped who Jesus is. She still thinks of Jesus as a kind of saint, a great saint who has the ear of God. But, you and I know that he is so much more than that. We saw it last week in the story of the man born blind. Jesus is not merely a man from God. He is God from God, Light from Light. And this is why he corrects her.

Listen to his words: "**I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live....**" Here is the heart of it. Jesus is the Divine Life. He uses again those all-important words: "**ἐγὼ εἰμι.**" I am who am. He is the Divine Life. Therefore, whoever cleaves to him; whoever lives in him; whoever is grafted onto him, will share in the life that he has. This is the key and hinge of our story.

Just as the man born blind from last week's Gospel, was salved and dipped into the water of Siloam and baptized into Christ; this is how he came to see! And so now, if you are grafted onto the one who is, in his person, the resurrection and the life, then you will live—even though you physically die.

At this point in the story we hear that Martha calls to Mary, and Mary gets up instantly and comes to Jesus.

(The Compassion of God in Christ's reaction to the death of Lazarus.)

He comes to the tomb, which in the Jewish manner is a cave with a large stone laid across it. What an image of the finality of death is this great stone at the entrance of the tomb. Martha, with all common sense, points out that by now there will be a stench. This is another way of saying that you cannot undo death; it will have its way. The stone and the smell are symbols of its finality.

But Jesus discounts such notions of finality and says in a loud voice: "**Lazarus come out!**" And the dead man came out.

Just as we saw in last week's Gospel from St. John, the theme of creation often arises. God created light and Jesus says to the blind man: "**I am the Light of the world.**" God fashions out of clay the first humans and Jesus makes clay to spread on the blind man's eyes.

Here in this week's Gospel story, the voice, the WORD is being emphasized. "**In the beginning was the Word**, says St. John, **and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**" This is the WORD by which YHWH makes the whole world! The WORD that effects what it says; that effects what it signifies.

The same WORD now that made the planets and the stars, speaks with the same creative powerful effect. The dead man rose and came out, tied hand and foot with face wrapped in a cloth.

Do you see what is being signaled here, my dear brothers and sisters? God's WORD, incarnate in Our Lord, Jesus Christ, is more powerful than death. THAT is the incredibly liberating and uplifting WORD that we are meant to hear today in this great Gospel account from St. John. God's love for us is stronger than death. We mustn't make Him weep by endangering our eternal lives with sin. Let us utilize well this season of repentance, prayer, fasting, and works of charity.

Glossary

YHWH = the name of God in Hebrew

ἐγώ ειμι = "I am" in Greek.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella