

Fifth Sunday Lent Year "A"

April 5-6, 2014

Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

The account of the raising of Lazarus in the 11th chapter of St. John's Gospel has all the elements one might expect in a feature film: it has the drama with the sickness of Lazarus; it has *pathos*, with the emotion of Jesus; it has *suspense*- first we are told a man is sick, and immediately afterwards we are told that he has been dead for four days; it has the raw human emotion of **anger** and even a touch of an accusatory tone in the question posed to Jesus. There is a lot at stake in the Gospel.

Clearly Jesus had another purpose for this raising from the dead. He was making a much more profound point about the nature of life for those who believe in him. "Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die." *Never* is a very long time! Eternity is a concept that beggars the imagination. We have such an inadequate notion of eternity, with attention spans being measured in seconds now, not even minutes.

We live in a consumer society, a "throw away" society. We go through things so quickly. I am amazed at how much paper I drop in the recycling box under my desk each and every day, without fail. The home team in a Major League Baseball game goes through between five to six-dozen baseballs in a typical 9-inning game. The average ball last for six pitches! As soon as it is scuffed up, it is gone, good only for batting practice. If a pitcher throws a curve ball that ends up in the dirt, the home plate umpire will usually check it and almost always throw it to the ball boy.

How long does it take for a computer to become obsolete these days- three years? The bill in your wallet will circulate for about 18 months and it will be destroyed; joggers will tell you the average pair of running shoes is measured in miles, approximately 350 to 500 miles. And so it goes in life.

I no longer presume that “eternity” even sounds appealing to people anymore today. Perhaps we would be better served by speaking of happiness in Christ. Do you desire it? If so, then the next step is to ascertain in what happiness consists. If eternity is beyond the scope of people’s comprehension, we may need to approach the reality of eternity from the back door, so to speak- from a different angle.

Many experiences in life, while enjoyable, do not and simply cannot bring lasting happiness. It is sad, but some people are depressed when they return from vacation. A vacation ought to refresh and restore, but not if its purpose is to “forget about life” for a while. Jesus is teaching us to look beyond what is before our eyes to see the endless possibilities for true happiness in heaven. His own personal response to the death of Lazarus should in itself quell any image of an aloof Jesus, distant from human emotions, joys and struggles. Had he been indifferent to the sadness experienced by the relatives of Lazarus, how could we see in him someone who truly understands us and experiences what it means to be human?

Jesus was trying to teach Martha and Mary that Lazarus may have been dead in the body but that there was a new life made possible precisely, and only because of the bodily death. If not, what good would it have done to raise him from the dead- he would just have to die again at some point? Life is precious, absolutely precious and inviolable. God is the author of life, and He alone has the right to call us home to himself. Jesus is teaching us that resurrection is “life in Christ,” and that to “rise with Christ, we must die with Christ, ” especially by dying to our sins.

Death is utterly transformed by Christ, and death is seen by the person of faith as a participation in the death of Christ. It is the lesson Jesus was teaching Martha and Mary. Eternity is a long time. Let’s focus on getting things right here and now, and then eternity will take care of itself.

We have entered into Passiontide. Our fasting becomes more intense; we even fast from the beautiful images in our Church, and can only gaze upon them shrouded in purple cloth. The veiling of crosses and images is a sort of “fasting” from sacred depictions that represent the paschal glory of our salvation. The tradition of veiling the **crucifixes** stems from the Gospel of John 8:46-59, at the end of which the Jews take up stones to cast at Jesus, Who hides Himself away.¹ The veiling also symbolizes the fact that Christ’s Divinity was hidden at the time of His Passion and death, the very essence of **Passiontide**.

As we draw ever closer to the paschal mystery, let us embrace this important lesson about death, approaching it with the eyes of faith that cast aside all doubt, despair, and fear. As St. Francis of Assisi so beautifully wrote as he neared death in 1226:

Praised are you, my Lord, for our sister bodily death,
from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who will die in mortal sin!

Blessed are they who will be found
in your most holy will,
for the second death will not harm them.²

Canticle of the Creatures

¹ Read for the liturgical Sunday, Passion Sunday (Extraordinary Form calendar).

² Laudato si’, mi’ Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale,
da la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare :
guai a quelli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali ;
beati quelli ke trovarà ne le tue sanctissime voluntati,
ka la morte secunda no ‘l farrà male.