

Fifth Sunday in Lent

We hear the Lord speak to us in the Scriptures according to the ways that we need to hear Him. The Lord knows our fears, our isolation, and the limitations with which we are living. The Lord speaks to us about rising from the dead when we are doing all that we can to stay well and avoid sickness and death. The Lord understands our need to nourish our faith when we are hungry for the Eucharist.

I think it is good to listen to this gospel story as a story about coming to a deeper faith in Jesus. We are introduced to the characters of our story, Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. We are told that it was the same Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. But this is yet to happen. When it does happen Jesus will describe it as the moment when he is anointed for his burial. That will be the moment when Mary surrenders herself completely to him in love; when she comes to believe in who he really is.

Right at the beginning Jesus makes clear what the purpose of this whole episode will be. "This sickness will not end in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified." What surprised me was that Jesus was looking further ahead than anyone could imagine. On one level the glory of God was

revealed to those who could see God at work in him as he raised Lazarus from the dead. But on a deeper level the raising of Lazarus from the dead became a death warrant for Jesus. It was through his own death that he would be glorified.

There are many moments in the story when people misunderstand what Jesus is saying and doing. The disciples cannot understand why Jesus delays in going to Lazarus. Nor do they understand, "Our friend Lazarus is resting, I am going to wake him." Jesus has to make it clear that Lazarus is dead. Thomas misses the point also when he says, "Let us go too, and die with him" Yes, Jesus would have to die; but his focus was not on death but on revealing the glory of God.

I had never noticed the difference between how Martha and Mary relate to Jesus. Martha comes to meet Jesus. Mary is called to him. Martha says that she believes in the Resurrection of the dead. When she is asked if she believes in Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, she cannot say that. Martha expresses her faith in Jesus in words that express a very traditional, limited understanding of Resurrection of the dead and of who Jesus is as the Christ of God. Mary on the other hand throws herself at the feet of Jesus saying, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary

rather than Martha expresses her faith in Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life.

But then Mary falls away from that faith. Up to this point there had been no tears. But then she gets swept up by those Jews who had accompanied her to Jesus. They can only see death and they mourn. Mary had been looking at Jesus the source of life; but now she turns away. We read, “At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who followed her, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, ‘Where have you put him?’ Jesus was angry now that not even Mary could come to faith in him in the way that he had hoped. He too weeps, but the Greek uses quite different words to describe his sorrow and the weeping of Mary and the Jews.

Despite that disappointment Jesus knows he must go on. He is not put off by Martha telling him that he must not open the grave because the body of Lazarus had begun to decay. It is in the prayer that he prays to his Father that he reveals why he is doing all this. “But I speak for the sake of all these who stand round me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me” Jesus then commands Lazarus to come out of the grave. But he is still bound up by the clothes of death. He commands, “Unbind him, let him go free.” This part of the story will only make sense when we read how after

Jesus’ own resurrection the cloths in the empty grave will be so important in bringing his disciples to faith in that resurrection.

I think this gospel is particularly challenging for us as we look for ways of growing in faith in the mist of the Corona virus. We can be like the disciples who only half hear what Jesus is saying. We can notice the bad things happening to us and our world without seeing the great good that is being done by so many. We can think of what we have been deprived of rather than look for new ways by which we can be in contact with God and with one another. I can be like Martha who holds onto things with which she is familiar. Or I can try to make room for new insights. I can be like Mary also, expressing a deep and profound faith at one moment, but then getting swept away by those around me who see things with much poorer vision than I have been given. Perhaps the challenge of today’s gospel is to understand that even in this time of uncertainty and crisis, Jesus keeps calling us to him, as he did Mary. That invitation to come to Jesus is an invitation to come to a deeper faith in him. It is that faith that will sustain us and allow us to grow as a human person. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. He is the one from whom we draw life; life that sustains us now; life that we will share with him forever.