

5th Sunday of Lent, Year A

GOSPEL

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Mary and Martha sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill.' On receiving the message, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.'

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judaea.'

On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. When Martha heard that Jesus had come she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you.' 'Your brother' said Jesus to her 'will rise again.' Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said:

'I am the resurrection and the life.'

If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?'

'Yes, Lord,' she said 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.'

Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!' But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?' Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha said to him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day.' Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said:

'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I knew indeed that you always hear me, but I speak for the sake of all these who stand round me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me.'

When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.'

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him.

(John 11:3–7, 17, 20–27, 33–45)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Mary, Martha and Lazarus, named as special friends of Jesus, lived in Bethany, a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem, just over the Mount of Olives.
- Popular Jewish belief was that the soul hovered near the body for three days after death. The 'fourth day' indicates that Lazarus is well and truly passed away, thus making his resuscitation even more amazing.
- The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, but the Sadducees did not.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The pure human emotion of Jesus in this text attests to the love he had for Lazarus, but this human affection is nothing compared with the future promise to which the actions of Jesus towards Lazarus will lead. For those without faith, the tomb is simply a place of human corruption and decay. Death has ultimate power over people. But for people of faith, the tomb holds no fear. It is ironic that in raising Lazarus to life, Jesus is ensuring his own death at the hands of 'the Jews' (see verses 49–53). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the power of sin and death is broken, and instead, resurrection and life are offered to all who would attest with Martha that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It is Jesus who is the resurrection and the life! There is a fundamental difference between the death and resurrection of Lazarus and that of Jesus. Lazarus will return to death, symbolised by the fact that he still wears the clothes of death when he comes forth from the tomb. Jesus' death, however, will lead to a glory that lasts forever, symbolised by the fact that his death clothes are neatly folded and placed to one side when he emerges from the tomb (see John 20:6–7). The resurrection of Jesus brings eternal life.

- What aspects of your true self have been 'buried'? How can Jesus help to bring these forth?
- What 'new life' will be yours after baptism or reception?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who has come into this world.' Are you able to make this total affirmation of faith?
- 'Even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you.' What do you ask at this moment?
- 'Unbind him!' In what ways are you still bound? What must you do to shed your bindings?
- What have been the 'deadening' experiences of your life—those things that closed you off from other people? What have been the things, people or occasions that have made you 'alive'? Share your stories.

- Be 'life-giving' to others this week. Acknowledge and affirm them in particular ways.
- Use Martha's creed this week:

Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Faith in the resurrection of the body is one of the articles of faith in the Creed, and yet it is a belief that is difficult to understand. From earliest times in the Church, this belief raised questions among those coming to faith. In the face of the mystery of death, all explanations are ultimately inadequate. Our best response is to put our faith in the words of Jesus: 'You who believe in me, even if you die, you will live forever.'

- Examine the section of the catechism that deals with the resurrection of the body and the meaning of Christian death (CCC, §§988-1019). Clear up any lingering questions or doubts that the elect may have of this future hope of faith.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

When Jesus calls forth Lazarus from death and the darkness of the tomb to new life, we hear echoes of the Christian belief in the power of baptism. The same symbolism appears in the baptismal ceremony. When baptism is performed by full emersion, this symbolism is even more powerful.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- How does your community remember and celebrate those who have died in faith? Look at the symbols and dedications in your church of people who may be commemorated by family and loved ones.
- Use a lighted candle and the open Scriptures as a focus for prayer. Give thanks for those people in your life who have been 'life-giving'. Pray for each other as you near the end of your journey of preparation. A suitable song could be 'We who once were dead' (GA 188). Conclude with a selection of the prayers of intercession from the third scrutiny in the *RCIA* at §161.

NOTES