

5th Sunday Lent Year “A” “Jesus was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.”
Cathedral of Saint Paul/March 28, 2020 (515p Livestream)
Readings: Ezekiel 37: 12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

We live in a throw-away society. We want some things to last forever, while others we consume so quickly as to hardly even notice. We want Monday-Friday to speed by so that Saturdays last forever. We want good times to last. But as our own experience proves, things do not last.

In normal times, I would have been attending the Twins Home Opener this coming Thursday. An average of **100+ baseballs** are used during just one game. \$10,000,000 per year! The dollar bill in your wallet will last on average only 18 months before it is taken out of circulation and destroyed. The shoe worn by the typical runner on an average surface will last between 350 to 500 miles.

Thus, when someone beloved is taken from us, it is as difficult as life gets. It is all the more so when a loved one is taken from us without warning or preparation. That is just one reason why the flu pandemic is so scary for many, especially for seniors.

The account of the raising of Lazarus in the 11th chapter of St. John’s Gospel is one that contains all the elements one might expect in a feature film. It has *drama* with the sickness of Lazarus; it has *pathos*, with the emotion of Jesus; it has *suspense*—first we are told that the man is sick, and immediately afterwards 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 so much at stake in today’s Gospel. Especially in these unusual times, people’s questions are legitimate. What is the relationship between our faith and our emotions? How do we manage disappointment and anger in our lives? Why do people die? We could add—Why do things such as pandemics happen?

The raising of Lazarus had to have a purpose, for it is clearly a fact that even if raised, he would surely die again. Was this action of Jesus merely a temporary fix to a problem, to the raw emotion of those who missed him deeply? It has to be more than that, for would they not be equally sad at some other time in the future? Presumably, his life was not extended by very many years in any case. Clearly, Jesus had **another purpose** for this raising from the dead.

Jesus 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 long, long time! Eternity is a concept that beggars the imagination, and yet it is a state of being towards which we must strive, working out of salvation in fear and trembling.

At times I have wondered if this promise of Jesus is even capable of being understood in any meaningful sense. We have no notion of ‘forever,’ and with attention spans now being measured in seconds, not even minutes, it can make us question if it is even desirable to live forever. [I admit I insisted on the short form of the Gospel...I am just as guilty] With what may we compare this? Do you desire happiness, true happiness? If so, then the next step is to ascertain *in what this happiness consists*.

As we grow in faith we realize that experiences, even while enjoyable, fail to bring about a lasting sense of peace. In some ways, God is competing with a society in which instant information is the norm, constant activity the expectation.

Yet, our true home is heaven, and we need not worry what we will do to keep ourselves occupied, especially when cooped up at home these next two weeks. Above all, be patient with one another; get outside and go for walks. Enjoy the relative silence without the endless streams of cars passing by your home.

All these questions, and concerns will fade away into nothingness, for we will be in the presence of our creator who is everything- all in all.

I suggest that we begin to stretch our attention spans by sheer willpower, if nothing else. When I joined the seminary, I could not spend even five minutes in quiet prayer. Listening to God's Word and following his will takes lots of time. Honestly, we would struggle to sit through one of St. John Henry Newman's or Archbishop Ireland's sermons today...they went on for 45 minutes. It was a different era.

Jesus is trying to teach us to look beyond what is before our eyes to see the endless possibilities for true happiness in heaven. At the same time, his own personal response to the death of Lazarus guards against any image of Jesus as someone totally removed from human nature, its emotions, its joys and struggles. Had Jesus 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?

Yet, Jesus clearly taught us to trust in his word, and not to be paralyzed by these questions, because he himself provides the answer in his very life and death.

With the Crucifix behind me now draped, we have enter into Passiontide. Our attention is drawn to the apex in our liturgical year, even from our homes. The divine drama is moving towards its culmination, faithfully and methodically. As we enter into these mysteries ever more deeply, let our attention be fixed on him who is the source of our salvation and the source of our joy.