

Fifth Sunday Lent Year "A"

April 2, 2017

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

The account of the raising of Lazarus in the 11<sup>th</sup> 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 includes the raw human emotion of **anger** and even a hint of an accusatory tone in the question posed to Jesus. There is a lot at stake in this Gospel.

Clearly Jesus had another purpose in raising this man from the dead. He was making a 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 now in seconds, not even minutes.

We live in a throw-away society, quickly consuming things. I am amazed at how much paper I drop in the recycling box under my desk each and every day, without fail, though I feel I am making progress at going paperless. It is so easy to just get buried. The home team in a Major League Baseball game goes through five to six-dozen baseballs in a typical game. The average "life span" for a baseball is six pitches! Once it is scuffed up, it is gone, good only for batting practice.

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.

We want the good times to last and the difficult moments of life to pass quickly. In today's culture, 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 perspective.

Many experiences in life, while surely enjoyable, do not bring lasting happiness; they simply cannot, because they are not tied into life's ultimate goal. Our Gospel speaks of walking in the light. If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles. It seems to me that we need to be able to discern what **is** and what **is not** the light of this world. Are we prepared to walk in the darkness? Do we know our way? Do we believe that God will show us the way?

Jesus is trying to teach 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 while Lazarus may have been dead in the body, 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. Jesus is teaching us through the account of Lazarus that resurrection is life in Christ, and that to "rise with Christ, we must die with Christ."

To die with Christ means first that we must die to our sin. That is the only way that we can die with Christ. Death is transformed by Christ, and our death will be seen by the person of faith as a participation in the death of Christ. It is the lesson Jesus was teaching Martha and Mary.

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. You might even say that the glory of the Lord is covered and shrouded in darkness, so that we can focus more intensely upon the paschal mystery in these next two weeks.

This veiling of the **statues** and icons stems from the Gospel reading of Passion Sunday (John 8:46-59), at the end of which the Jews take up stones to cast at Jesus, Who hides Himself away. 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 light and darkness, approaching it with the eyes of faith that cast aside all doubt, despair, and fear.