

Fifth Sunday of Lent 29th March 2020: Readings and Reflection

First Reading: Romans 8: 6–11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel Reading: John 11: 1 – 45

A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly

and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection by John Shand

The Gospel of St John is beautiful and profound from beginning to end. It starts with that amazing poetic fanfare: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". It ends with the fervent prayer that all of us should come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.

I suspect that I am not alone at times in finding John's subtle, complex theology difficult to grasp. Yet it has an exciting immediacy for many new in faith. This is summed up beautifully by one of my favourite biblical translators and scholars, Fr Nick King:

"As soon as you open John's Gospel you are aware that you are breathing a different air from that which you encountered in Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is a magic pool in which an elephant may swim and an infant may paddle. It is a journey into the mystery of who Jesus is, inviting us in ever deeper as the story unfolds".

John wishes us to understand that Jesus, his close and beloved friend, is fully human yet also fully the Incarnation of God. He achieves this in two ways. First, his Gospel is rich with Signs of the Divinity of Jesus in the performing of miracles; from turning water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana, to feeding the five thousand and walking on water; to numerous acts of healing. Second it is full of discourses where Jesus spells out exactly who he is. "I am". I am the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Gate to the sheep pen; the Good Shepherd; the True Vine.

Today's account of the Raising of Lazarus is a perfect example of this.

First we have a miracle quite unlike those that have gone before. It was not a passing encounter with the mortality of strangers. This is no abstract sign of power. Jesus, Man and God, is drawn into the grief of Mary and Martha, two of his dearest friends. He is not an observer but a participant in the rawness of their suffering. We encounter the stench of death. He is confronted with the visceral anger that flows from their bereavement. How it must have torn his heart apart to hear both Martha and Mary accuse him: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died". Many of us will have had such pastoral experience of people lashing out in black despair. And how did Jesus respond? It was not with the aloof detachment of somebody laying claim to divinity. He reacted as would a dear and loving friend; as a vulnerable human being. He wept. He entered the fetid tomb and lead Lazarus out into life. The message is clear. As a Man he wept; but he then drew to himself the power of God.

Second, we have yet another self-identifying proclamation, perhaps the most awesome in John's Gospel: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live". In turn Martha responds with a faith and understanding that put Jesus' other disciples to shame: "Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into this world".

Jesus' unconditional immersion in the suffering of his friends and their unconditional response speak to the heart of our anxieties in these troubled times.

Amen