

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Death is a significant part of our humanity. It is not unusual to hear about death and about people dying but rising from the dead is not a common phenomenon. In the Bible, we have stories from both testaments about people coming back to life after death through some divine interventions.

Elijah and Elisha brought people back to life through their prayers to God (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:17-37). Our Lord Jesus Christ raised Jarius' daughter to life (Luke 8: 41-42, 49-56) as well as the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). However, the raising of Lazarus to life is not only peculiar (he was dead for four days and was decomposing), it is also filled with a lot of lessons that are relevant to the mission of Christ as well as to our lives as Christians, especially in the context of the Lenten season.

We shall study the highlights in the narrative of Lazarus' illness, death and being raised to life while applying them to our lives in line with the other readings of this Sunday.

The Illness of Lazarus

The Gospel Reading began by telling us that Lazarus was ill but we do not know the details of his illness. We understand illness as a disease of body or mind. In this situation, Lazarus could have suffered from a very severe disease that defied every medical assistance; that could explain why the family sought the attention of our Lord. He learns from a messenger that the one he loves is ill and in response, he says that the illness is not unto death. We can also understand this illness in our context as being cut off from God (John 15:5). Being separated from God is another way of saying that we are living in sin. Sin creates a barrier between us and God (Is. 59:2). We all are ill in one way or the other (Romans 3:23). Our illnesses need the attention of our Lord Jesus Christ whose healing power surpasses all others. We pray that our illness like that of Lazarus not lead us to death. Some illnesses (sin) could lead to death, and other do not result in death (1 John 5:16) especially when we call the attention of our Lord Jesus Christ like the family of Lazarus did in the Gospel Reading today.

The Death of Lazarus

Death is the cessation of all life functions in a body. Spiritually it is a total disconnection from God. Lazarus eventually died (though physically) despite all the efforts made to save him from dying which included the invitation of Jesus Christ. The narrative tells us that our Lord stayed back where he was for two days after the news of his friend's illness. Ordinarily one would expect him

to leave everything and head to Bethany. God's time is what we call delay in human terms. With God, there is nothing like delay. What we call delay does not amount to denial before God. God's plan happens at His own time. That is why we are asked to be strong and wait on the Lord (Psalm 27:14). The reason for our Lord's "delay" could be seen from the earlier statement he made: "this illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." If he had gone earlier, that glory would not have come. Some things that happen in your lives are meant for the glory of God; so relax!

The Tears of the Lord

This will be one of the few places our Lord will explicitly weep. In the Gospel of Luke (19:14), he wept over Jerusalem because the souls that are lost there. During the crucifixion, we heard that he cried out with a loud voice when he said "My God! My God why has thou forsaken me" (Matt.27:26). The tears of the Lord were not just because of the death of his friend, after all, he was going to raise him to life. Jesus wept for our sins that inexorably lead us to death. Jesus wept for our lack of faith which Martha and Mary expressed when they said: "Lord if you were here your friend, would not have died." To demonstrate this, our Lord said to Martha "do you believe?" In other words, "where is your faith." Jesus, our Lord, is still weeping at every moment of our episode of sin and lack of faith in him.

The Tomb of Lazarus

Lazarus was dead for four days before our Lord came. In the words of Martha, there was a possible stench in the tomb. Now the tomb points to more than a place of burial. In fact, we have many tombs confronting us in life in the form of frustrating experiences that hedge us in. But the greatest tomb is that of sin. Our Lord came to liberate us not only from sin but its tomb; its mortal entanglement. From the tomb of Lazarus, we learn that sin not only brings about death it also imprisons us in some damnable tomb. The tomb of Lazarus points to the tomb of our Lord Jesus. While Lazarus needed our Lord to raise him from his tomb, our Lord rose by the divine power he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Lazarus stayed four days indicating to the fact that he is rising in human frailty; to die again. But our Lord rose from the tomb on the third day on the wings of his divinity unto immortality. The tomb of Lazarus reflects the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the tomb of Lazarus mortal life was restored but at the tomb of our Lord Jesus eternal

life was restored. At the tomb of Lazarus, a man rose to die again. At the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man rose not to die again.

The Untying of Lazarus

After the stone that was used to close the tomb was removed at the direction of our Lord, he invited Lazarus to come out, and he came out. We are also being called this season to get out from our various tombs. The dead man came back to life. However, it seemed from the narrative that he hopped out of the tomb because he was still in the death clothing. Hence our Lord commanded: “untie him let him go!” This scene is very significant. When our Lord rose from the dead, he did not need anyone to untie him though a shroud covered his body. This shows the difference between the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus by his power. There was no need for help, unlike Lazarus who needed some assistance. Lazarus represents all us who need to be set free from so many sinful accessories in our lives. We notice that it was not our Lord himself that untied Lazarus. This untying reminds us that our Lord appointed some people to set free those who are tied up by the devil and sin. In the Gospel of Matthew (18:18), he says: “whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.”

The prophecy of Ezekiel in the First Reading tells us that God will put His Spirit in us that we may live. In the Second Reading St. Paul tells the Romans (8:8-11) that the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies. As we step closer to the celebration of the paschal mystery, let us prepare our minds and our hearts for the cleansing power of God who will raise us up and establish us once more.