

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Lazarus

March 29, 2020

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Today's Gospel begins with Jesus making a mistake. Upon hearing the news that one of his closest friends is sick, he does not immediately disrupt his plans and run to his bedside. Rather he assumes people are over-reacting and decides to finish what he is doing before heading to Bethany. It's a story for our time.

Now the gospel writer does try to protect Jesus from blame. John has Jesus tell the disciples that it was his plan all along for Lazarus to die and then for him to raise him from the dead. But despite what he says in the story, that is not how he acts. Rather upon reaching Bethany and learning that his delay meant that he arrived too late, he is overwhelmed with grief...grief and I imagine in my head, remorse, even guilt.

And so Jesus does something unprecedented. Something he never did before and will never do again. He performs a miracle without anyone asking for one. In fact the sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary try to dissuade Jesus from re-opening the tomb. But he needs to do this. This is a miracle he needs to do....for himself.

Now one might say that the miracle was for Lazarus. But Lazarus will die again. No, the miracle was for Jesus. Like the widow of Nain, Jesus feels overwhelmed and bereft at the death of his friend. In the case of the widow of Nain, Jesus miraculously raises her son back to life, less for the son's sake but for the sake of his mother. For his death leaves her, already a widow, completely alone and abandoned. So too here, I imagine the miracle to be less for Lazarus' own sake than for Jesus, who feels grief at his death, and remorse at his own earlier minimizing of the situation.

As Christians we are to follow Christ. But we cannot follow him here. We cannot raise our dead back to life. But we can accompany Christ in his own pain, as we will accompany him next Sunday in his Passion. We can be with Jesus in his pain, as he is with us in ours. We can be a true friend for him, as he is a true friend for us.

And what applies to Jesus and ourselves also applies to us with one another. These days we must remain physically apart, but we can still be connected, connected perhaps more than ever over social media: Skype and Zoom, Facebook and Instagram, ...even Twitter.

Also like Jesus with Lazarus, we too may be feeling some remorse at not having acted sooner, individually, as a community, as a country, as a world. We, too, did not appreciate the gravity of the situation when the first news came out of Wu Han. In fact, most of us had never even heard of Wu Han. But today it is a household name. But again like Jesus and his disciples, the gravity of the situation has got our attention now, and our concern, our anxiety, even our fear.

It would be great if we could raise the dead like Jesus did. It would be great if this epidemic would miraculously vanish with the warmer weather. But what we can still do may be even more important. What we can still do is to help Jesus in doing what he was born to do, to bring new life to the living. As I concluded last week, and will probably continue to repeat over the weeks ahead,

we cannot physically share the Body of Christ this morning. We are going to have to become the Body of Christ ourselves.