

## 5th Sunday of Lent (John 11: 1-45)

Three simple words: and Jesus wept. Of all the lines in the four gospels, perhaps none are more endearing nor more telling.

The thought of Jesus shedding real tears over something we all experience--the death of someone we love--describes for us in no better way the empathy of Jesus for our human condition, which includes the sorrow of loss, the burden of grief. Lazarus is obviously a dear friend of Jesus and the Lord demonstrates in these three simple words the truth of his humanity.

But as our Christian faith professes, Jesus Christ is not only human, he is also divine. And his divinity is conjoined with his humanity for one specific purpose--the salvation of the human race.

And so it is very important that we recognize there is something more going on here in the story of the raising of Lazarus than merely Jesus' ability to identify with the burden of human grief.

Twice in this gospel passage it states that Jesus became perturbed. Now, it is understandable that we might interpret this agitated state of Jesus' emotions as having resulted from what can easily be determined as a lack of faith, first, on the part of Lazarus' sister, Mary and second, on the part of the friends who have gathered to comfort Mary and Martha.

Mary says: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And the Jews say: "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"

Both lines suggest that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' illness from ending in death, but what's worse is that both lines suggest that Lazarus' death means it's too late for anybody, including Jesus, to do something about it. Jesus is essentially being told: "You are as helpless as we are in the face of death."

The Lord is not so much perturbed because of any lack of confidence on the part of Mary and her friends, but more to the point, because he comes now to the last and greatest sign which he is to perform which points to who he truly is as the One sent by God the Father into this world. He has told Martha that he, Jesus of Nazareth, is the resurrection and the life.

And now, through the act of raising a man from the dead, Jesus shows himself to be the instrument through which God grants new life. Indeed, Jesus IS the very new life of God, which is why he can say to Martha: "I AM the resurrection and the life!"

The Lord is calling Martha, and all of us as well, to not simply believe in a doctrine of resurrection, but to believe and come to know him AS resurrected life itself. That is so much more powerful and deeper than any doctrine.

Now, Jesus has brought the dead back to life before. He raises the daughter of Jairus, who apparently has just died, and he also raises the son of the widow of Naim, whom he encounters as they're carrying the young man's body to the cemetery. So both are very recently dead.

But Lazarus, we are told by Martha, has been in the tomb four days, and as she says: "by now there will be a stench." Decay and rot are presumed to have set in. It's a way of saying: "Jesus, don't you see? It's really too late."

However, it's all brushed aside by Christ. "Lazarus, come out!" The words are said in a loud voice.

Now, not to make a joke, but I sometimes wonder if this is where we get that expression: not so loud, you might wake the dead! One wonders how loudly you have to say something to be heard by the dead?!

But this reminds us of what is stated in the Book of Genesis, how God creates by "speaking" creation. "Let there be light!" There is no suggestion of any timidity on the part of God. It's a command,

and the same, I think, applies to Jesus' words to Lazarus. Jesus is "commanding" new life. It's not a suggestion.

Is not Jesus performing an act of re-creation here in calling forth Lazarus from the tomb? This is his last and greatest sign or miracle that he performs. From this point on, the gospel of John takes us into the account of the passion and death of Christ. It is as if Jesus is saying: "I've given you various miracles as signs pointing to who and what I am--changing water into wine, multiplying a few loaves and fish into food for thousands, restoring the blind and the lame to full health-- but this one, this miracle of raising my beloved friend, Lazarus, from the stench of death itself, when all seemed lost, this is the one sign above all that leads right to the heart of that one and only sign of your redemption: my own suffering and death and glorious resurrection, the new life you can find in me alone as the eternal Son of God, your savior. Amen.