

## **Meditation for March 27, 2020**

Fr. Loecke's reflection (Part 1 of 2), 5th Sunday of Lent: For the past two weeks, the Gospel has been taken from St. John: The woman at the well who had five husbands, the man born blind who was healed by Jesus, and today we hear the story about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. At the bottom of this post you will see photos taken in the Holy Land of the Church of St. Lazarus. The exterior photo shows a beautiful mosaic of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The inside paintings are on the church walls depicting Martha and Mary with Jesus, Jesus entering into Bethany and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The photo of the altar is where we had Mass that morning.

Here are a few details about the story of the raising of Lazarus from our tour guide Iyad who was just exceptional. He is a man of deep Catholic faith. He had an amazing ability to tie history, biblical passages, geography and archeology together to give a most fascinating picture of what took place in the places we visited. To begin with, Bethany is just a short distance from Jerusalem, the gospel says two miles. I always thought Bethany was like a middle class suburb of Jerusalem until the tour guide told us otherwise. Instead of being middle class, Bethany was a village inhabited by the poor and the sick. Rather than being a nice place, it was instead a rather depressing area, and yet Jesus frequented the home of his friends. The poor, the sick, those on the fringes of society were always very close to the heart of Jesus.

St. John says that when Jesus heard about the death of Lazarus he stayed on where he was for an additional two days. When Martha saw Jesus coming to Bethany she ran out to meet him and in deep grief told Jesus that if he had been there her brother would not have died. Eventually, Jesus asks to be taken to the tomb of Lazarus. When he is standing in front of the grave, Jesus asks that the stone be removed at which Martha makes an interesting statement, "Lord, it has been four days surely there will be a stench." What is important to note is that Martha says "...it has been four days." What difference does the number of days make? For us, once a person is declared dead we know that is the end of that person's earthly life. However, for the Jews, the person's soul or the spirit remained for three days. After the fourth day, the person was viewed as being officially dead. Had Jesus gone on the third day, and called forth Lazarus from the tomb, some would have said Jesus did not perform a miracle at all because Lazarus was not really dead. But the fact that it was the fourth day makes all the difference in the world, as Lazarus was truly dead. Therefore, when Jesus called him forth it really was a miracle; a miracle only God could accomplish and, as a result, unnamed people began to believe in Jesus because of what they saw and heard.

The sisters Martha and Mary are friends of Jesus who believe that he is the Messiah. Martha, and eventually Mary, go out to meet Jesus. Both makes similar statements to Jesus that if he had been present he would have healed their brother. It is most touching to see the dynamic unfold between Jesus and Mary as Mary speaks volumes with her emotions. Mary's weeping and wailing are powerful acts of mourning that affect those around her, including Jesus, who is upset and deeply moved by her pain. Though he demonstrates his power and divinity by raising Lazarus, Jesus, in a loving way, expresses his humanity in his reaction to Mary's grief and in his own weeping for Lazarus.

I believe deeply that Martha and Mary show us what faith in Christ looks like in reality. Even when faced with a most painful loss, they are steadfast in their trust, and their faith is deepened and strengthened by their interactions with Jesus. Martha expresses her faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the One who is to come, Son of God. Mary's wailing touches not only those who were there to comfort her but Jesus as well. Martha and Mary preach through their words and actions that Jesus is truly the Son of God. Their testimony is given to us to strength our faith and belief in Jesus.

For me, this beautiful story is not just a story about a town outside of Jerusalem. Rather, it is a story about a truth that applies to all of us. Are we not all residents of Bethany, a place where the sick and the poor lived? Are we not all in need of the healing graces that only God can offer? Jesus is the only one who can free us from what binds us in life, keeping us from living in the Light that makes us free. We can learn much from these two women, friends of Jesus, who inspire us to maintain an unshakable faith, even during the darkest of hours.

As part of this reflection I asked Becky to play the hymn, "Christ the Lord." I would ask that you listen carefully to the words which offer a message of hope and Light during difficult days. (The video and lyrics) will be on a separate post.