

Fr. Curtis Miller March 29, 2020

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Let us begin by continuing our journey through the Stations of the Cross.

The Ninth Station: Jesus Falls the Third Time. Finally Jesus reaches the foot of Mount Calvary. He has been heading there all day, really for the past three years of His ministry, or even since the moment Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and reject His love. It has all been leading to this moment in this place. As He begins to climb the rocky hill, Jesus' legs must have trembled, pushing to propel the weight of His Body and the cross upwards. The uneven gravel digs into his feet and He stumbles to the ground again, the heavy wood crashing into His scourged back and striking the ground with a dull thud. Every pain is reawakened by this jolt. Yet Jesus doesn't stay down. He gets back up and continues his upward climb.

The Tenth Station: Jesus is Stripped of His Clothes. When Jesus finally reaches the top of the hill, He is finally able to set down the heavy burden of His cross. But there is no rest or relief. The soldiers strip Him of His clothes, leaving Jesus exposed to jeers and mocking. Looking at Jesus now, I repent of all the times I've stripped others of their dignity, through gossip or using people. I pray that God will cloth with His grace anyone I have hurt or offended.

The Eleventh Station: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross. It has been said that it was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross; it was His love. Some mock Jesus, saying, "If He really is the Son of God, let Him come down from the cross." Jesus has the power to end His suffering, and to come down off the cross. But He doesn't. With perfect love, Jesus remains up there for you and me. Jesus had said, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all to Myself." Jesus, draw us now into Your heart.

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And now let us turn our attention to today's Gospel reading. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were Jesus' friends who lived in Bethany. With them, Jesus could relax and be welcomed like a member of the family. He loved them. The sisters are best remembered for the story about the time when Martha was irritated when Mary just sat at Jesus' feet, listening to Him, instead of helping with the chores and serving. Jesus taught Martha to not be worried and anxious about many things; the better part is to be at peace, learning from Him.

Yet at this time, Martha had reason to be worried. Her brother was deathly ill, and they sent word, asking their friend Jesus to come at once and heal him. Strangely, Jesus doesn't go right away. He does not answer their fervent prayer. Lazarus dies.

When Jesus finally does arrive, Martha and Mary seem to rebuke Him, each saying, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” How often have we said that to Jesus? “You weren’t here with me when I needed You.” But Jesus is always with us, and often what seems like delay to us is actually Jesus preparing something better, as he did with Lazarus. Martha, however, does show us (in spite of her heartache) an extraordinary example of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, with power over life and death.

But before the miracle, we read: “And Jesus wept.” It’s one of the shortest, and yet most profound passages in the whole Bible. In that moment, even though He knows what He is about to do, Jesus still mourns, He still feels the same anguish we feel when we have lost a loved one. Jesus allows Himself to suffer this so that He can offer true comfort to us who mourn.

We know how the story concludes. Jesus does something remarkable and unexpected: He raises Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is showing us a hint of the final victory He will win over death in His resurrection.

Often at funerals and at the bedside of the dying, I will pray the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd... Though I walk through the shadow of death, I will not fear for You are with me.” Going through this pandemic can feel like passing through the shadow of death, and unfortunately it will probably get worse before it gets better. Yet we can’t lose sight of Jesus’ promise to remain with us always. He is our Good Shepherd, Who does not abandon us to the wolves or thieves. No. Jesus stays with us and lays down His life to protect us.

That would be a beautiful, though sad story, but that’s not the end. In raising Lazarus, Jesus shows us His divine power over life and death. He lays down His life, but He also takes it up again in His resurrection. Jesus will not leave us in the shadow of death either. He will raise us up in a way more incredible than Lazarus’ return to his old life. Jesus will take us with Him into His resurrection to eternal life, where we will be able to be with Him forever.

Therefore, whatever happens today or tomorrow, place your trust in Jesus and do not be afraid.