

29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 Lent 5 Reflection/ homily on John 11:1-45

At this time we are hearing a great deal about death. Daily, countries report ever increasing numbers of deaths caused by Covid 19. There are reports of the deaths of young people, medical workers, and people in hospital. This is in addition to the deaths some people are coping with of parents or grandparents. People feel sadness; emotions are high as we experience the loss of much that is familiar; being able to travel freely, to socialise, to go to work or school, some people are losing their jobs.... And yet there is much goodness and cause for hope as well; 100's of thousands of people have offered to volunteer with the NHS, neighbours have been active in offering support to each other.

So today's gospel story is a familiar one, people are weeping over the death of a loved one. We hear how the death of Lazarus leaves a great absence in the lives of those who loved him. Jesus arrives but Lazarus is already dead and Martha says regretfully, perhaps reproachfully, but also with faith, 'if you had been here my brother would not have died'. Her sister Mary seems to be worse affected, she can't leave the house, maybe she was keeping busy, it is one of the ways we respond to loss. She says the same to Jesus; 'if you had been here my brother would not have died.'

I'd like to pick up on two aspects of this story, firstly that Jesus had friends, and secondly, that Jesus was not afraid to reveal strong emotions, when Jesus was invited to come and see where they had laid Lazarus, Jesus wept.

It seems that in Bethany, which is just a few miles outside Jerusalem, Jesus had friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who he could visit, stay with and feel comfortable with. Everyone needs friends. Particularly now, as we face restrictions, and many are self-isolating, it is good to have friends who keep in touch, whether by phone, email, or video chat. The gospel shows Jesus as a faithful friend. He didn't leave Martha and Mary to grieve alone, he came and shared their sorrow, and gave them hope.

One of the surprising aspects of the story is that Jesus is described as being in great distress and he weeps. The only other time Jesus is recorded as weeping is when he approaches Jerusalem and sees the city. The view is in the photograph behind me. It's taken from a small church on the Mount of Olives, called Dominus Flevit, Jesus wept, because he saw that the city was heading to destruction.

Often we are not comfortable with tears. Tears tend to be seen as a sign of weakness. Yet, they are perfectly right and healthy when we respond to the death of a loved one. Jesus didn't feel the need to conceal his emotions. Grief, as we respond to loss, is one of the strongest emotions we generally feel. So it isn't for the best to suppress and bottle things up. The way to deal with grief is to let it run its course, to work through it, with honesty and with loving support.

When we are face with tragedy and great loss it is natural to ask, why did God let this happen? Where is God in all this?

The story of the raising of Lazarus shows one response. Jesus did not leave his friends alone in their grief, he came to them and shared their grief. The same is true for us. When we feel great loss when we are grieving, Jesus comes, He is with us.

God does not cause the tragedies that we experience, they are not a punishment or a test, but God does show that they can be transformed, that life can spring from death. God joins us in our grief and weeps with us. Not only is God with us, but he also invites us to take action and become part of the story and part of bringing in that future and new life which is God's will. As he reached the tomb of Lazarus Jesus says, 'take the stone away', then when Lazarus appears he commands, 'Unbind him, let him go free'.

Jesus invites us to be part of his work, of unbinding, of releasing and of freeing. Jesus invites us to join him in bringing hope and sharing what is life giving. It has been so encouraging to hear of so many good neighbours and acts of kindness. May God be with us and open our eyes to his presence when he comes.

Amen

Let us pray:

God of healing and hope, in Jesus you meet us in our places of pain and fear. Look with mercy on those who have contracted the new virus, on any who are vulnerable, and on all who feel in danger.

Through this time of global concern, by your Holy Spirit bring out the best not the worst in us. Make us more aware of our interdependence on each other, and of the strength that comes from being one body in you. Through Christ our wounded healer. Amen.

(Sam Wells)

For those who are guiding our nation at this time, for our government and those shaping national policies, that they may make wise decisions, through Christ our Lord,

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you taught us to love our neighbour,  
and to care for those in need  
as if we were caring for you.  
In this time of anxiety, give us strength  
to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,  
and to assure the isolated  
of our love, and your love,  
for your name's sake.

**Amen.**

Gracious God,  
give skill, sympathy and resilience  
to all who are caring for the sick,  
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.  
Strengthen them with your Spirit,  
that through their work many will be restored to health;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

We pray for those who have died, for all who have set us an example of love and who have now entered into glory, may we be inspired by their lives and seek to live to your praise and glory.

Merciful Father....