

Fifth Sunday Lent

The great prophet Ezekiel says: *I am going to open your graves; I mean to raise you from the dead*, in the first reading and St Paul says *Jesus will give life to your own mortal bodies* as he did in the raising of Lazarus. Of the thirty-three miracles worked by the Lord, three pertain to resurrections: the little girl, the widow's son and Lazarus. Of these three, this one is exceptional in all respects. It manifests the Lord's compassion or better put empathy for those whom he loved who were suffering. It also became the human catalyst (causes a reaction) that provoked his death, the culmination of his earthly life.

Let's revisit the data. At Bethany, a few kilometres outside of Jerusalem, lived this well known family that Jesus often visited: the two sisters Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus. They were very close friends. Now, Jesus is in the transjordan region about a days walk from Bethany, when word arrived that Lazarus is seriously ill – please come. Jesus, replies that 'this sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.' Now, his glory is his death. In short, this sickness of Lazarus which will lead to his death and resurrection which will be like a catalyst, causing the Lord's death. So, Jesus does not respond to the family's plea for help, but waits two more days. Why? So that Lazarus who is dying may be actually dead and buried. The apostles are unaware of this being his motive. When they eventually begin their journey the Lord says to them: 'Our friend Lazarus is resting, I am going to wake him.' Since they fail to understand his meaning, he says bluntly 'Lazarus is dead.' I am sure they must have stopped in sorrow, heads downcast, perhaps even thinking, had he gone earlier to heal him, it would not have happened. Why did the Lord delay? Why does God delay, in answering our prayers? Always remember, a sincere prayer to God is always heard. Sometimes the answer may be no, other times, God may delay is responding, for our sake. Then, the Lord says these words which had to have resulted in confusion: 'And for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.' On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already and many Jews had come to the family to express their condolences. Amid all the activity at the wake, Martha comes out to meet Jesus and said: 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died...' Jesus replies: 'Your brother will rise again' which she takes to theologically mean: 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Then, Jesus asserts: 'I am the resurrection and the life... and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord,' she said 'I believe that you are the Anointed One, the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.' After this affirmation of her faith in him, she goes and brings Mary out of the house to meet the Lord. Many of her guests, now follow, thinking that she might be going to the tomb. Now here is the exceptional scene. When Mary sees Jesus, she falls at his feet with tears saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' It is not an accusation but an exclamation of sorrow. Seeing her sadness, Jesus wept. The Greek phrase implies that the Lord was overwhelmed with sadness – seeing her sadness - he groaned within and was deeply disturbed and as they approach the tomb he weeps again, in great distress. Ask yourself why? Was he not about to bring Lazarus back to life. Reason dictates not sadness, but otherwise. Is it a head or heart scenario. At times, silence in sorrow suffices, and words convey little meaning. We all know that in human tragedies, it is not so much what is said that helps but just your sheer presence – being there, showing empathy, is all that matters. Still sighing, Jesus reaches the tomb and at his command they took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: 'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I knew indeed that you always hear me 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out alive, after four days (he should have been decaying with a stench) and many of the Jews had seen what he did believed in him. In summary, a chemical catalyst causes a reaction, this spiritual catalyst caused its desired effect, an outrage - raising someone from the dead after four days - that the Jewish leaders were forced to arrest him, leading to his death.