

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

This is a reflection on the readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent in Year A: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic all churches were closed from 23 March 2020. If you have not already done so, please take a few minutes to read John 11:1-45 – the Raising of Lazarus.

At this time of global upheaval and as communities around the world lock down to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, we are all confronted by something that has totally transformed how we relate to each other. It has also reminded us of the limitations of human knowledge and ultimately of our human mortality.

Today's Gospel is about death and it is about faith. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last of a series of signs that form the framework of John's Gospel. It is also the third part of the great trilogy of readings that we have followed on these three Sundays of Lent.

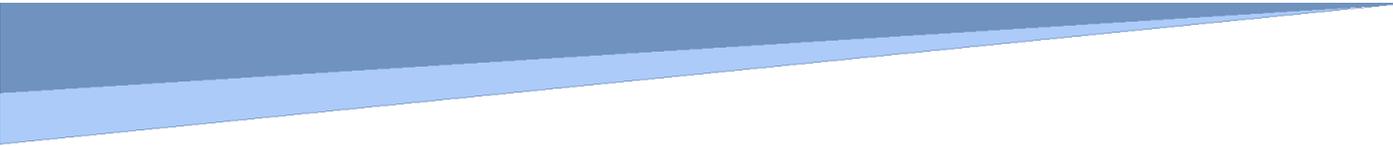
The first was the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The second, the healing of the man born blind and the third is the raising of Lazarus. The signs are about people coming to believe in Jesus.

In John's Gospel the first sign was the changing of water into wine at a marriage feast in Cana. But as John's Gospel unfolds, we see that the signs alone are not enough. Something more is needed if we are to come to believe in Jesus. Two weeks ago, as we listened to the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, we saw that she needed to let go of the prejudices that stopped her recognising who Jesus truly was.

Last Sunday the encounter with the man born blind took us to the next stage of the journey. To see with the eyes of faith the man had to stand against the Jewish authorities. He is an example of those who grow in their faith through persecution. The pharisees were blinded by a different prejudice. They believed that the Law of Moses was the way to God, but their narrow interpretation of the Law stopped them seeing how God was at work in their lives.

Now as we come to the third story, we see people struggling to believe in the face of death. The key characters are the disciples and Martha, the sister of Lazarus. They do believe but they still struggle to understand. Martha is already a disciple of Jesus, but she does not yet understand this new life that Jesus is offering her.

Jesus has again returned to Jerusalem, this time for the feast of the Dedication of the Temple. But as the campaign of the Jewish leaders to arrest him grows, Jesus withdraws to the east, across the River Jordan. That is where he is in the opening scene in chapter 11 when Martha and Mary send a message that his friend Lazarus is seriously ill.



Jesus does not respond immediately. He waits for two more days. Why? In John's Gospel no detail is there by chance. Whenever Jesus is confronted by a human need, his response reminds us that something more is happening.

Jesus is not just a miracle worker. He comes to reveal the Father's Glory and he does that not by miracles but by doing the will of the Father. Martha does believe that Jesus is the Messiah, yet she still struggles, "If you had been here my brother would not have died."

Faced with the death of someone close to us, we often react like Martha. We experience grief and even anger. Where is God? Why did God let this happen? And like Martha it is precisely in the midst of our grief that we are asked to believe.

When Jesus says to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" he is talking about something more than the life we live now. Lazarus is returned to life but he is still mortal. He will still have to face death. Death is the moment when we realise that all our human supports: our material security, our loving relationships, all have to be left behind. At that moment all we can do is to trust that God is with us.

Jesus says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the Glory of God?" This story is not about Lazarus, it is about the consequences for Jesus. This last sign is also the last straw for the Jewish leaders. The consequence for Jesus is the cross.

In the face of his own death Jesus also has to believe and in John's Gospel, as we hear on Good Friday, his death is also the moment of his glorification. "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those, who believe in me even though they die, will live."

When Lazarus comes out of the tomb, he is bound and his face is covered. When Jesus is raised, the tomb is empty and the cloth that covered his face is folded up. What Jesus is offering is not more of the same.

In the face of death, we are all like Martha, we struggle to believe. Our faces are still covered. We walk by faith and not by sight.

What then is this life that Jesus offers? That is the Easter question.

Paul Crowley
29 March 2020