

LECTIO DIVINA: John 11: Resurrection of Lazarus

In this period of Lent, which prepares us for Easter, we are enjoined to rediscover our baptism which on these Sundays is presented to us in the symbols of water, light and life.

In the Gospel passages prescribed for the most recent Sundays, Jesus reveals himself progressively. **He is the "living water"** that quenches our thirst for happiness and the infinite. **He is "the light of the world"** that illuminates our darkness by giving us faith - that is, a new understanding of God, of the world, of ourselves. In the passage set for next Sunday, Jesus, in his raising of **Lazarus**, reveals himself as the One who possesses **the fullness of life** and communicates it.

Quench your thirst. Open your eyes. Live. The growth offered by Lent this year is an unstoppable crescendo. **The Samaritan woman (4: 5-42), the man born blind (9: 1-41) and Lazarus of Bethany:** three icons of human weakness which Jesus comes to meet.

Today's Gospel relates the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany, in the home of Martha and Mary (John 11: 1-56).

The resurrection of Lazarus is **the miraculous sign of Jesus, placed at the culmination of the "signs" which the evangelist presents as stages of a gradual revelation of the mystery of Christ.**

It is a page full of messages and mystery that smacks of paradox: in fact, while Jesus conquers death and brings his friend back to life, he himself goes towards his own violent death, in accordance with the decision of the Sanhedrin (cf. John 11: 45-54).

In this context of conflict between life and death, the resurrection of Lazarus takes place.

The episode of the resurrection of Lazarus confirms this certainty: **Jesus is the source of life for the communities of the poor, for all those who believe in him.**

In the first stage (vv. 1-6) the illness of Lazarus, friend of Jesus, is announced by the two sisters who send a friend to tell Jesus: "He whom you love is sick!" (John 11: 3-5).

Jesus responds to their call and explains to the disciples: "This disease is not mortal, but it is for the glory of God, so that through it the Son of God may be glorified." (John 11: 4). The conversation about the illness of Lazarus and the return to Bethany allows us

to understand the role of the disciples and the choice made by Jesus: to help his followers to mature in faith. Jesus deliberately lingers, before going to Bethany (John 11: 1-6) **to cause his disciples to reflect on the mystery of life and prepare them for the event of the resurrection.**

In the second stage (vv. 7-16) Jesus makes the decision to go to Judea, while his concerned disciples represent to him the risk of deciding thus to publicly expose himself, and Thomas sarcastically says, "Let us also go to die with him."

In the third stage, the longest (vv. 17-36), the arrival of our Lord in Bethany, **the dialogue on the mystery of life and resurrection with Martha, the most practical, and with Mary, the most contemplative, is described. First on the scene is Martha** who goes to meet the Lord, while Mary remains at home (v. 20). The dialogue with Martha reveals **the dynamic of faith:** believing means welcoming the mystery of Christ who reveals himself as the Son of God. Martha says **she believes in the resurrection** at the end of time. **This ancient faith, however, does not renew life** because it is not enough to believe in a resurrection that will take place at the end of time; **we must believe in the**

Resurrection already present here and now in the person of Jesus and in those who believe in Jesus. Before seeing the concrete sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, **Martha confesses her faith:** "I believe that you are the Christ, the son of the living God." (John 11:27). **Martha speaks to the future, Jesus speaks to the present.** Jesus announces **the resurrection** to Martha (v. 23), not just the final one, but **the present one**. In so doing Jesus pronounces some of the most important words of the Gospel: "**I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live; whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**" We should note the succession of the two words: "I am the **Resurrection and the life.**" **First comes the Resurrection, then life, and not vice versa. Resurrection is an experience that affects, first of all, our present and only then our future.**

To Jesus' question **Martha responds promptly with a splendid declaration of faith:** "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who must come into the world." (v. 27).

Then **sister Mary** enters the scene, repeating what Martha said. After meeting Mary, who recognizes him

in faith, and throws herself at his feet, **Jesus is deeply moved** before the tomb of Lazarus.

A further emphasis is given by the **presence of the Jews** who came to console the two sisters, and who are witnesses of the great event.

The Jews, representatives of the Old Covenant, only know how to console. They do not give new life ... Jesus is the one who brings a new life!

In the fourth stage (vv. 38-44) the miracle of the resurrection takes place, preceded by Jesus' prayer to the Father (vv. 41-42) and followed by the amazement and faith of many eyewitnesses. **Lazarus comes out of the tomb and this event becomes an anticipation of the Lord's Easter.**

Jesus gives orders to remove the stone. Martha reacts by saying: "Lord, there is already a foul odour, because the body is four days old!" (John 11:39). Again, **Jesus challenges her to believe in the resurrection, here and now, as a sign of the glory of God:** "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" (John 11:40).

In John's Gospel, the glorification of Jesus takes place through his death (John 12: 23; 17: 1). One of the

reasons for his being condemned to death will be the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11: 50; 12: 10).

They roll back the stone. **It is for men to withdraw the stone. And for God to resurrect.**

Before the open sepulchre and before the unbelief of the onlookers, **Jesus directly addresses the Father. In his prayer, first he gives thanks:** "Father, I thank you that you listened to me. I knew that you would always listen to me." (John 11: 41-42). Jesus knows the Father and trusts him. But now he asks for a sign on account of the crowd that surrounds him, so that it is possible to believe that he, Jesus, is sent by the Father.

Jesus' prayer becomes the most eloquent key to reading this event, in that it constitutes the revelation of the sonship of Jesus and his obedience to the will of the Father.

Then Jesus shouts aloud: "**Lazarus, come out!**" Lazarus comes out (John 11: 43-44). **The symbolism of the sepulchre** from which Lazarus emerges alive (wrapped in the grave cloths), will be taken up **in the Easter context:** the resurrection tomb remains empty and Jesus leaves the bandages and the shroud there. From the Christian perspective, death receives a new decisive interpretation: it is a passage towards the glory of God! **It is the triumph of life over death, of**

faith over unbelief. After the resurrection of Lazarus many of the **Jews** who had come to Mary, at the sight of the resurrection of Lazarus **believed in him.** We must identify in **Lazarus of Bethany, buried, tied and blindfolded for four days, the ordinary condition of human existence.** **Jesus is the Word of God** which calls out to existence, which reanimates hope, which redefines the future. The message of the resurrection of life is designed to help us **face hopefully even our most difficult situations such as the pandemic of these present days.** In Christ we are called to give a new meaning to the pain, suffering and even death of many of our brothers and sisters who may die **without a friendly word; without a priest at the bedside; without the sound of a passing bell.** The passage highlights the role of that centrality of faith **which comes from the encounter with Christ.** The path of faith is symbolized variously by the characters who revolve around Jesus. The **types and attitudes** of faith are **different: the disciples** do not understand; **Martha and Mary** welcome Jesus by going through the experience of pain; many of **the Jews** present believe only after witnessing the miracle. Faced with the resurrection of Lazarus, we are called to reflect on and **verify our degree of faith** in the face of the

circumstances and trials of our life. **Jesus, in the raising of Lazarus, reveals himself as the Lord of life.**

Confronted by Jesus who presents himself as the resurrection and life, we must be able **to let ourselves be saved, to let us relinquish life**, to convince ourselves that death is a deception, that Jesus has opened that door once and for all and from that door we too can pass without hurt.

Beyond, therefore, the lacerating experience of death - the one reality that seems true and final for men - we are invited to behold the victory of Christ, his love which is the salvation of mankind. It is Jesus alone who, in the face of his friend's death, continues to hope.

The resurrection of Lazarus is not only a symbol of the future resurrection, but also a sign of that gift which the Lord Jesus already bestows *now* on those who believe.

The believer already possesses the “life eternal” now, even as he waits for the bursting and final maturation of this life. **Already now, in the present**, Jesus is for all believers that divine, ineffable, eternal life that will never die.

The voice with which Jesus summons Lazarus is also **the voice of the one who here and now spiritually**

calls the dead to rise and to live. It is not just an **invitation to everyone to come out of the tomb** of their selfishness, torpor, narrow-mindedness, despair; but it is also an **effective word that genuinely gives liberty** and provides us with the taste of real life, because He *is* Life.

In this episode Jesus manifests himself as **true man and true God.**

Jesus, as true man, cultivated friendship, and was moved to tears at the grave of his friend Lazarus. This weeping, so human, shows us the reaction of God in the face of our pain and our death. He does not remain cold and indifferent, but is moved, feels profoundly the pain of our situation, marked as it is by suffering, and challenges the human being at his point of greatest vulnerability: **the fear of death.**

We members of the ecclesiastical community are similarly called **to cry with those who weep for the unexpected death of many a brother or sister and to rejoice with those who rejoice for the birth of children to life, and for the healing of those who have been infected.**

Jesus, son of God, restored Lazarus to earthly life.

With the power of his word he called him back to earthly life. **The Church too is called** to give, through the sacraments, **the life of grace** to those who have lost it.

For our part, **as baptized Christians**, we are every day called **to die with Jesus in order to rise together with him**, to have more and more in us the new life which is the gift of the risen crucified Christ.

This life was born in you in Baptism **and is reborn each time in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.**

The sacraments help us to live a truly moral Easter through a more mature faith, a more active charity and a more ardent hope.

It is necessary to believe. Faith is the only condition that Jesus places on Martha and it is the only condition Jesus places on us, on everyone. Martha's cry: "I believe you are the Christ, the son of God", perfectly defines what **the Christian faith** is: not the simple adherence to a teaching, but **the attachment of the whole being to the living person of Jesus Christ.** This faith in Christ is **the foundation of our hope** and must illuminate and give meaning to our whole life.

We too, like Martha, are attached to the things of the earth and believe in the Lord, but with **a faith that sends everything back to the last day,** that does not upset our life here and now, that does not really let us understand what life means and what death means. We Christians must really ask ourselves **how much we believe in the words of Jesus** each time we are faced with everyday choices, choices which start us on the way of life or that of death.

Christ is always at the centre of our life: not to eliminate the trial, but to make us accept it in the new perspective of the sacrifice offered for love.

As he cried for his friend Lazarus, Jesus cries for me: I am Lazarus, I am the friend, sick and loved, whom Jesus refuses to accept is torn from him. From the tears of Jesus we learn the heart of God. **The reason for our resurrection lies in this love even unto tears. We rise now, we will rise after death, because we (you, me, all of us) are loved. God's love is stronger than death.**

Supported by this hope, we shall find that we can walk always with courage, serenity and joy on the way of life, in the certainty that it leads us to the Father's house.

✘ Michele Pennisi, archbishop
26th March, 2020