

5th Sunday of Lent 2020

In my final year in St Malachy's College, a friend of mine went into a diabetic coma and died. I still remember the shock and the devastation. All of us have had the shattering experience of the death of some one very close to us; it unleashes deep emotions and yes, tears. For day after day now, because of coronavirus, we have watched the death toll grow ever higher in other countries. Our medics warn us that our turn is about to come. We will not escape this deadly virus - but there is much we can do, and must do, to limit its onslaught - heed the advice, "Stay at home!" Even so, we know that in spite of whatever measures we take, many in our community will fall seriously ill, and some will die. In the days ahead there will be many broken hearts and sad homes.

Today, is the 5th Sunday in Lent; on this Sunday we read the Gospel account of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus and Lazarus were friends – it seems that Lazarus' house, where he lived with his two sisters, Martha and Mary, was for Jesus, a home from home. We can gather from the Gospel the depth of that friendship for we are told that standing before the tomb of Lazarus, *“Jesus wept”*. This is a natural response to human emotion, but perhaps it is also an indication that, in this particular moment, Jesus acknowledges what will be involved as he confronts his own death.

Sickness and death had broken up that close-knit family in Bethany, but Jesus intervened to waken Lazarus from the “sleep of death”, and reunited him with his sisters. Now while bringing Lazarus back to earthly life was indeed an extraordinary miracle, it was a sign of something greater still. Although restored to life, Lazarus will die again, die a second time! Bringing people back from the grave is not why Jesus came. He came to give life that cannot be touched by death. The earthly life to which Lazarus was restored merely symbolized a new unending life, God's very own life, which Jesus, by his resurrection, makes possible for us to share in. Listen again to his own words: *“Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”*.

Facing death constitutes a unique challenge to faith. This was true even for Jesus, as we will see in Holy Week as we reflect on his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and listen to his cry of desolation from the Cross. The death of a loved one, or reflecting on the prospect of one's own death,

causes us to realise that all depends on God. In death all that we have treasured in life is left behind. If there is no God there is nothing; if Christ did not confront death and conquer death, there is no future. As St Paul, rather bluntly states, *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile."* (1Cor.15:17)

But Jesus did confront death, and by his resurrection defeated death. Martha was asked by Jesus; *"Do you believe this?"* Do you believe that *"I am the resurrection and the life?"*. She answered. *"Yes, Lord, I believe"*. Now, in this moment, we are asked the same question, *"Do you believe this?"* When coronavirus strikes hard at our community, as our clinicians have warned us it will, this question will take on a reality and a rawness for many as they cope with their grief.

Some may feel that faith is an act of self-delusion; that belief in eternal life is merely to clutch at straws in the midst of grief, when the heart is broken and the human spirit distraught. Yet, although we freely acknowledge that we do not know and cannot describe the reality of eternal life, we believe that the reality exists, for we have placed our hope in him who is *"the resurrection and the life."* Despite the apparent finality of death, in death life is changed, not ended. This is our faith. We do not know the details of what awaits us after death, but we know in general terms that life does not end in nothingness. (cf p 2, *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI)

Let us hold in our hearts these words of Jesus, *"Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?"* "Yes, Lord, I believe! I believe; help the little faith I have. Amen