

Connecting with the Sunday Readings

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Gospel Word

John 11:1–45

Death interrupts everything! The death of grandparents, parents, or children, often serves as a major turning point in the lives of remaining family members. It is very appropriate that the greatest miracle of Jesus, aside from his own Resurrection, is the raising back to life of Lazarus, his dear friend. Conquering death, destroying its firm grasp on us, is a basic human longing and hope. But is this a false hope? No one escapes this question.

Nothing causes more fear in us than the anticipated thought of our own death. What's to become of me after I die? What will it be like once I make that final journey? Will it be the absolute end of my existence? Will there be light at the end of a tunnel, as some have reported? Will I meet Saint Peter? There is no doubt that the reality of death is what most disturbs us, if we are not in denial. It directly connects us with the most basic content of our Christian faith. As Christians, we believe that God's power and love conquers death. Like Christ, like Lazarus, we too will be raised from the dead. That's the center of our faith and the substance of our hope.

The raising of Lazarus is one of the longest narratives in the Gospel. But none of it is extra or unnecessary. Every word counts. Every verse is important. A careful reading of this part of John's Gospel will yield much more than simply hearing it once at Mass. While reflecting on this Gospel, keep in mind that it's about God creating life and remaining with life, our lives, all the time. Jesus died so that we may live. Lazarus died so that Jesus could show in very dramatic fashion that God is a God of the living, now and forever. Even in the midst of the many small deaths we experience during our lives, God wants us to live abundantly.

Living the Word

So many times, the Gospels repeat the same invitation: fear not. Do not be afraid. But what do we fear more than anything else? If we are honest, we fear death, our own death. We fear that our life, that we value so much, will end some day. We may not want to think about this, but nothing is more true or certain. A fear of dying can paralyze some people or make them so careful that they risk not living a full life. Living that way is very unfortunate and according to today's Gospel reading, very much outside of God's will for us. If you read the story of Lazarus very carefully, you will notice that Jesus is promising that those who believe in him will never die. In other words, once we are joined with Jesus in faith, hope and love, we are joined with the very source of all life. That's why the image of the vine and the branches is so telling. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. His life flows into us like a stream of living water.

So *live* a little. We are almost at the end of Lent and we will soon enter the glorious season of Easter. The Lazarus story is a preview of Easter. Shed your fears, lighten your heart, and give thanks to the Lord of Life: your life!

*-by David Thomas, PhD, Co-Director,
The Bethany Family Institute*

One-line Prayer

God the Holy Spirit, thank you for your life-giving love. Amen.