

Dear Friends,

Our gospel for this 5th Sunday of Lent has Jesus heading to Bethany. From our reading of the gospels of Mark and Luke, we learn that Jesus frequently visited the town (see Mk. 11:11; 14:3 and Lk. 10:38). Today he goes there at the request of two sisters, Martha and Mary who sent word to Jesus saying, "Master, the one you love is ill." I find this line to be significant, as I do the one that almost immediately follows, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." Why is it so significant? They are the first time we hear of Jesus' love for individuals. We know from his many acts of compassion, the feeding of the 5000 for example, that he loved people, but this is the first time in John's gospel that his love for an individual or individuals is recorded. This, however, makes the following line a bit puzzling: "So when he heard he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was."

If Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus so much, why did he remain where he was for two more days? Why didn't he go immediately to them? Martha certainly wants to know why as she remarks upon his arrival four days after the death of her brother: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would never have died." But she then adds, "But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Martha is a woman of faith. Her human nature could very well be disappointed at Jesus' delay, but her faith demonstrates trust in him. And Jesus does not disappoint. After telling her, "I am the resurrection and the life," and asking "Do you believe this?" to which she replies, "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God," he asks "Where have you laid him?" and proceeds to reveal his power over life and death by raising Lazarus from the dead.

We can read this account on two levels. The first would be that of Jesus' victory over bodily death. The second is his victory over sin. We profess that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. That truth applies not only to our belief that one day he will raise us from our physical deaths to new and everlasting life, but also to the reality that in this life we are like Lazarus, lying in a tomb of our sinful behaviors, bound to them much like he was bound by his burial cloths. As Jesus loved Lazarus, so, too, does he love us; and as he wept at Lazarus' tomb, he also weeps by our tombs as he sees sin holding us in its grip, closing us off from his love and life. As he did then, so he does today; he calls, "Come out!" inviting us to rise from our sins and turn back to God, to be converted.

Lent and Easter are filled with the drama of death and resurrection. To fully partake of it we must enter into it. We must profess Jesus as the resurrection and life by confessing our sins, seeking his merciful forgiveness and living the newness of life to which we are called. It is then that we can go out and renew the places we live with the same love by which Jesus loves us.

Peace and blessings,

Father John