

LAZARUS – COME FORTH!

As human beings, all of us are experts at avoidance and denial. Nowhere is this more evident than in our dealing with the reality of death. For many of us, death is the ‘big pink elephant’ in the middle of the living room that we do our best to ignore (however, in times of plague when the elephant starts stampeding about sounding his trumpet, he can hardly be ignored any longer, can he?). If outright denial or avoidance fail, as they now do, we often try the rationalistic or scientific approach telling ourselves that death is a natural and normal part of life and that we had best come to accept it. True as far as it goes, but it hardly goes deep enough, does it? As long as we’re content to remain on the surface of things or we personally remain untouched by death’s presence this idea has some merit; but look inside yourself more deeply however, or have a loved one die unexpectedly, and this reasoned, objective and impersonal explanation is quickly exposed as the over-simplification that it most assuredly is. For the mature Christian believer the apparent finality of death is a scandal. Although death can seem to be a relief in the face of severe illness or suffering, all of these earthly realities must be seen for the aberrations that they are. We were not created to be defeated and destroyed by death or illness or suffering as we now are; indeed, the contrary is true.

Consider today’s well known reading from John’s Gospel: It is interesting to note, that although Jesus cries at the death of his friend Lazarus, though we know not the reason, his prevailing mood throughout is one of anger. Jesus is both saddened and perturbed that his friends Martha and Mary suffer from the death and loss of their brother. He is anxious to show them that these seemingly invincible forces are in fact transitory and that he has come to obliterate the fear they shackle us with. This is the third and final of the three great Gospel readings from John which focus on the Christian life

begun in baptism. In the first two, both the woman at the well and the man blind from birth remain unnamed and therefore representative of all people. In each case, a journey of faith is begun where the person moves from ignorance to knowledge. Today's selection is quite different for from the beginning Lazarus is named and identified as both a believer and friend of Jesus and the brother of Martha and Mary. Whereas the first two stories can be seen as generalized and catechetical in nature, now we hear an account that was undoubtedly historical at its root.

The fact that John chooses to conclude this series of readings with a very human and moving vignette from Jesus' life is important to understand. As Christians, each of us is on a journey of increasing depth and beauty, called to ongoing conversion and growth. We thirst for God's presence in our souls and being blind from birth yearn for God's light. These human realities allow us to grasp important truths from the first two stories. Nonetheless, we will all die no matter how far along the journey we have traveled, and this jarring fact, lying as it does at the conclusion of our lives, seems to defeat everything that we have struggled and sacrificed for. It stands like a dark veil beyond which we cannot see and which therefore seems to mock our faith and hope. For that reason, the raising of Lazarus from the dead taking place as it does in the course of continuing events and not at the end of time is an important reminder for us. It shows us that the power of the Spirit with which we have been baptized is such that it will defeat even death itself; beginning right here and right now! But Lazarus' transitory triumph is instructive in another way as well for it reminds us that even now the Spirit of God sustains and uplifts us in the very shadow of illness, suffering and death; it frees us from the fears and terrors that so often swirl about their actual or anticipated presence. Their seeming victory is revealed as a sham, an illusion. For sure death seems to continue its reign unchallenged; but be not deceived! Death has lost its sting and therefore we can lose our fear! This happy fact lies at the center of all our hope and is the bedrock promise of our faith.