

5th Sunday of Lent (A)
Ezekiel 37:12-14 / John 11:1-45
06.04.2014
Love & Life

Limited by his own experience of love and death, the author of the Song of Songs declares: “Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave” (8:6). In our Gospel reading today, Jesus prophesies that the human perspective of the biblical writer is going to be utterly outdone by his victory over death. As Jesus calls back Lazarus to life, he shows that love is stronger than death and fiercer than all graves.

While in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are a few occurrences of dead people brought back to life by Jesus, in John’s Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus is unique. Moreover St John is aware that it is difficult for us to grasp the meaning of life and death so he gives us a key to interpret the resurrection of Lazarus: 4 times, the Evangelist feels compelled to mention the love which united Jesus to Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Love gives its true meaning to the event that happened at Bethany.

If God is love, then Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love. In its essence, at its core, love is for life, to love means wanting the beloved to be alive, to live fully. This is why Jesus calls his beloved friend Lazarus back to life, he could not have left him a prisoner of death.

What is interesting is that if Lazarus needs Jesus’ call in order to come out of the grave, he needs others in order to be set free, Jesus bids those around: “Unbind him, let him go free”.

The challenge is that we are called to live by God’s love and to reflect it, however numbly, and so our mission is to help one another to be fully alive and to walk freely. Each time we refuse to love a brother or a sister, we keep them in the shadow of death, we keep them buried under a heavy stone of rejection and loneliness. But that is not all, when we refuse to love, we deprive ourselves from the blood of life.

In our society, in our communities and in our families, are we driven by love? Does our love bid all men and women to come out from darkness to the light of life? Does our love spur us on to work for the liberation of all our brothers and sisters?

Clearly our physical limitations, our emotional scars and our fears, our failures and mistakes, our wounded past and our addictions, our refusals to forgive and change, our sins and weaknesses, will never cease to try to smother the breath of life in us. Like the bandages which bound Lazarus’ feet and hands, our dark side will always try to prevent us from walking freely and enjoying the light of life. However, the Lord calls us: “My friend, here! Come out!” And this call opens a way out for us. Jesus’ words are filled with the power of love. Just as at Creation when God’s words were creating all things, for Lazarus, and for each one of us, Jesus’ words accomplish what they mean, they free us.

Next week we will enter into Holy Week. John’s Gospel invites us today to reflect on our Lenten pilgrimage. The criterion by which we will evaluate those 40 days should not be whether or not we have managed to go to Mass more regularly or to have refrained from eating chocolates but whether or not we have grown in love. Have we become a more loving person, a more loving people? Thomas à Kempis reminds us that “God regards the greatness of love that prompts us, rather than the greatness of our achievements”. It should be clear for all of us that our Christian observances are – should be – a training in the art of love.

Obviously, like all forms of training, we know that the training in the art of love is not easy. More than that, we have seen and experienced in our own lives and in the lives of those around us that sometimes love prunes us. It is the mystery of love that sometimes, in order to be true to itself, love must make us pass through fire so that we may grow in life and in freedom.

Sometimes we cling to what holds us a prisoner. Sometimes like Lazarus lying in the grave with his cloth round his face, we do not want to see and we need God's love to challenge and prune us.

The Good News that we will solemnly proclaim again at Easter is that Christ's love for each one of us, his personal and unconditional love for you and me, is stronger and fiercer than anything in this world of time. With St Paul we should "be convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm 8:38-39).

In the 1940s, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote a little book entitled *The Little Prince*. There is an episode when the hero, a young boy, feels alone and longs for friendship. He meets a fox who explains to the boy what it means to love somebody, it concludes by saying: "To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you I shall be unique in all the world".

Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus in a unique way. He loves each one of us today in a unique way and it is why he calls us to life, an eternal life which begins here and now if, in our turn, we love him and one another in a poor and yet a unique and life-giving way.