

5th Sunday of Lent (A)
(Ezekiel 37:12-14 / John 11:1-45)
29.03.2020
Love, Life & Glory

In the story of Lazarus, there are three threads which should attract our attention because they hold the structure of the narrative together.

The first is love.

Obviously the theme is not unusual in the Gospels but its treatment here is quite unique. The whole story is built around and driven by the personal love Jesus has for Mary, Martha and Lazarus. What is at the heart of the narrative is Jesus' love for his friends; a love that is real and visible.

This is not really a surprise. Everything in the New Testament is about love. Jesus' life, from his birth to his death could be summed up by these two verses: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16) and "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). Moreover St Paul tells us that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rm 13:10).

Jesus' love for Lazarus has nothing to do with a heartless love or with the telescopic philanthropy described by Charles Dickens. Jesus experienced great distress and wept at the sight of Mary's pain. It was not a non-committal and distant love.

During this Lenten season, it is good for us to be reminded that, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote: "All observance is training in the art of love" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 307). During Lent our love has to be real. It should be visible in acts of generosity and kindness, in being hospitable and attentive to others, in making us forgiving and leading to intercede for all.

So, let us be clear, to stop eating chocolates, to pray more are very good things but the ultimate question we must ask ourselves is whether or not they help us to become more loving persons and communities.

Moreover we know that Jesus put his life at risk in going to Judaea. The disciples considered death as a possible outcome of their trip to Bethany. Here we are reminded that love is a costly business, it is a dangerous thing. Yes Christian love requires courage and boldness. It can lead us where we would not like to go, beyond our comfort zone. During Lent we may be called to cross barriers of fears and bring down walls of bigotry and bitterness in order to reach out to brothers and sisters in need of help and care.

The second thread is life.

Literally, in our story today, love calls Lazarus back to life, brings him back to life. In fact only love begets life, hate or indifference are sterile or degrading. Jesus' love for Lazarus is stronger than death. Jesus "came that we may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

In this context, life does not mean only a functional physical body. In the story, one aspect which is particularly significant is that, for Lazarus, to be alive implies that he has to be free. Jesus says to the people around: "Unbind him, let him go free".

For the people of Israel, the forty years in the desert were an arduous and long schooling in freedom. Our Lenten season does not need to be arduous and yet it should be serious enough to challenge all the forms of enslavement which prevent us from experiencing the freedom won by Christ for us. We think here of all the addictions, in regard to money, food, alcohol, sex, television or internet, we think also of all the times when we cling to past

hurts, when we stubbornly refuse to forgive and move on. To be alive means to be free to be truly alive.

Love and life.

The third thread which is mentioned at the beginning and at the end of our Gospel reading is glory. To Martha who doubts that the Lord can do anything for Lazarus, Jesus replies: "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?"

What is God's glory? According to the sacred Scriptures, the glory of God is God himself in all his authority and splendour.

It is something that he shares with his people. According to the psalmist, we have been crowned "with glory and honour" (8:5).

The problem is that God's glory is something that we can reject. At one point, we are told that the people of Israel "made a calf at Horeb and worshipped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass" (Ps 106:19-20).

We stop reflecting God's glory when we create idols for ourselves, when we allow sins to obscure our judgements and decisions, when we do not respect our own dignity.

Lent is a special time for us to remember our dignity, to let the glory of God shine forth anew in us. The best way for us to reflect God's glory, and the one which is suggested by our Gospel reading, is to be alive because we are loved; and because we are loved, to love. In the story of Lazarus, here more than anywhere else, the statement of St Irenaeus has to be quoted: "The glory of God is man fully alive" (*AH IV:34, 7*).

Lazarus was loved, he was brought back to life and became a sign of God's glory. This is what God wants to accomplish in all of us and in our communities. He cannot do this without us. In order to become beloved and living signs of God's glory we have to open our minds and hearts to God's grace and cooperate with it.

It is not because we are beginning out last week of Lent that it is too late. When St Benedict suggests that "the life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent" (*RB 49:1*), he means that our whole lives should be engaged in an ongoing growth in love, life and glory.

We have to remember that this journey from love, to life and to glory coincides with our deepest identity, it is the answer to our truest desire. We are the fruit of God's love, he made us for life and glory. This is what we long for, this is what we look for in all our decisions and actions: love, life and glory.

In the present Coronavirus pandemic, at a time when we hear a lot about self-isolation and social distancing, it is important to be reminded that life is about love.

While we have the moral obligation to respect the wise and necessary precautions suggested by the competent authorities in order to prevent the spread of the virus, as Christians, we also have to be imaginative and courageous to find ways to bear witness to God's love for all men and women.

Let us make God's glory shine forth in the world by the concrete acts of love we carry out for one another.