

5th Sunday of Lent (A)
(Ezekiel 37:12-14 / John 11:1-45)
26.03.2023
Sickness-Death-Life

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is built around three themes: sickness, death and new life. Lazarus was ill, has died and was brought back to life. I would like to begin by saying a few words on sickness, death and life.

Sickness. We all know what it means to be ill. In one way or another we have all experienced sickness and bodily pains. While this aspect of our human condition is at the centre of our Gospel reading, it seems to me that if we want this story to speak to us today we must consider Lazarus' illness as a metaphor for the sickness of our souls, the weakness of our wills, our inclination to choose what is wrong and our difficulty to discern what is right. All these infirmities can be considered as a fair diagnosis of our wounded humanity.

Like Lazarus we are sick. Lent is a good time for us to undergo a spiritual check-up, to name what is not in good health within us and, ultimately, to allow God's grace to prepare us for the health restoring celebration of Easter.

Death. Unlike illness, we do not know directly what physical death feels like. Yet since the day of our birth we have been experiencing many deaths, much letting go which was painful and often cost us a lot. We all have had to consent to the deaths of many dreams, expectations and relationships.

Like Lazarus we may have been in the dark, as if encased behind a big stone, stuck in our feelings of suffering, held prisoners by the burial bands of disappointment, bitterness, anger and hopelessness.

The story of Lazarus shows us that not all sicknesses lead to death. And here we reach the third theme after sickness and death; life. Yes the Lord can call us to freedom and new life whatever our present state of health, whatever illness we may be suffering from.

Even if we walk through the darkest valley (cf. Ps 23:4), the Lord's loud voice has the power to reach our ears and to bring us back to life.

The golden thread of the sequence sickness-death-life, the keystone which holds the whole narrative together is love, Jesus' love for Lazarus. At the beginning, middle and end of the story, we are told that Lazarus held a special place in Jesus' heart, he was loved by Jesus.

Without love, sickness and death lead to sadness and despair; without love, life is neither sustainable nor possible. Only love is life-restoring and life-giving. At Bethany, the Jews themselves, who most of the time are slow to understand Jesus' behaviour, see really what is at stake. St John tells us that they said: "See how much he loved Lazarus." It is the abundance of love, the outpouring of love from Jesus' heart which is revealed in Lazarus' raising from the dead. Such love is surprising because it is generously and unconditionally given, because it is stronger than death.

Like Lazarus, we are loved by the Lord with our ailments of soul and body. We are loved even when the situation seems completely hopeless and when we feel as if we are stuck behind a big stone.

Here we have to notice that, in the story we heard today, the stone does not move on its own. We are told that Jesus asked those around him to move it. So if it is indeed God's love which brings us back to life, we have a role to play in the process. We are asked by the

Lord to take away the stones which prevent us and also prevent our brothers and sisters in humanity from being free and fully alive: the stones of narrow-mindedness and discrimination, the stones of laziness and complacency, the stones of greediness and indifference.

We could sum up the challenge before us with three steps:

The first is to acknowledge that we are sick, that we fail and are vulnerable. But this acknowledgement is not enough, on its own it might only lead to revolt or hopelessness.

The second which is as necessary as the first one is to trust and believe that life is always possible, that something can be changed. According to the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, the problem for us "is that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being which always pushes us "down" rather than "up", which constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable." One of our sicknesses is certainly hopelessness, a lack of imagination which prevents us from hearing the inner voice of love which calls us to newness of life.

And the third step is to embrace life when it comes. We have to be open to the gift as it is, not as we would like it to be. We need to learn to let go of what we went through, the times of sickness, pain and humiliation endured along the way. Instead of nursing grudges, of pampering our fears and bitterness, we must cultivate life in all its forms.

Maybe the greatest difficulty for us is to consent to be loved, to be cared for and to know that, no matter what, this love is the rock on which we can stand and walk securely. And not only stand and walk on our own but in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Out of love, the Lord never ceases to call us to life. At all the turning points of our human pilgrimage, when we fall, make a mistake, take a wrong turn, the Lord calls us back to him and he waits for us to come out from our tombs.

Our Father in heaven wants us to celebrate and rejoice. This is what we will do at Easter and we will be able to do it in truth because Jesus will rise from the dead and make us sharers in his victory. Then the words of the father of the prodigal son will find an echo in our hearts: you were dead and have come to life; you were lost and have been found. (cf. Lk 15:32)