

A MEDITATION FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

During his earthly life Our Lord was a guest in many homes, but one of his favorite stops seems to have been the home of Martha, her sister Mary, and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus actually became a dear friend, so it's not surprising that when Lazarus fell mortally ill, his sisters immediately sent for Jesus: he would know what to do!

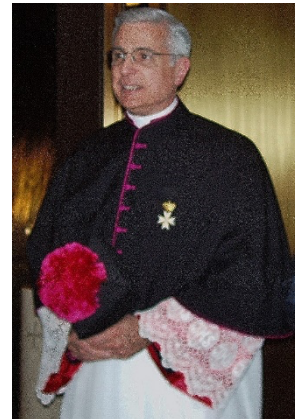
Surprisingly, Our Lord took his sweet time before going to his friends' home, and as a result of his delay—at least four days!—Lazarus was dead by the time he got there. Where is Jesus when you really need him? Why are people sick and dying, and the Lord seems to be doing nothing? Isn't Jesus our friend, and yet he seems to turn a deaf ear to our pleas?

In Lazarus's case, it all worked out in the end. The Lord said: "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to wake him" (Jn 11:11). Lazarus became the beneficiary of one Jesus' most dramatic miracles, for the Lord "cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' [and] the dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth" (Jn 11:43-44). The amazing scene is vividly depicted by Duccio di Buoninsegna (†1319) on the cover of this Sunday's bulletin. Christ restored his friend to life and good health.

That's great for Lazarus, but what about all the other people who died but weren't miraculously restored to life? The Gospels recount many healings by Jesus, but what about the countless people who were never cured? And even poor Lazarus had to die all over again! It seems that the Lord's miracle just postponed the inevitable, for no one gets out of here alive.

None of this makes much sense if we fail to appreciate that the raising of Lazarus is presented by St. John as one of the Lord's "signs." A "sign" in John's Gospel means an empirically observable wonder that is meant to convey a hidden, spiritual reality that can be known only by faith. What we observe is a sign of something that we can know *only by faith* in Christ's *word*. Jesus is saying, in effect, that what you see is meant to give you reason to *believe in my promise* of a reality that you can't see.

What is that promise? Here are the Lord's actual words: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:25-26). Notice the *promise* and the *question*. Everything



Christ proclaims calls for a personal response: do we or don't we believe in *him* and *his promises*? The resuscitation of a corpse is a marvel to behold, but it meant to be a "sign" of what the Lord is ultimately going to accomplish. Elsewhere, John describes that glorious future in terms of a vision he received:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.... I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away" (Rv 21:1, 3-4).

Indeed, the Lord does promise to wipe every tear from our eyes. There will, in fact, be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for *the old order will pass away!*

So, the question is posed to us: do you believe that Jesus, and Jesus Christ alone, offers you the hope of unending happiness and glory? In the last analysis *it all comes down to faith*. The raising of Lazarus was not something done just to help out a buddy. It was a *sign* in the Gospel sense of the word: a marvel for all to see that points to an even greater wonder that *cannot* be seen. Lazarus is raised from physical death to show us that Christ has the power to offer us an eternal life that transcends everything we know in this world.

Yet that reality remains hidden from our eyes. The current crisis is a stark reminder of our vulnerability and mortality. It also reminds us of certain truths we sometimes forget even though the Scriptures tell us that "here we have no lasting city" (Heb 13:14), and "it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27). Given all the challenges we face, we too must say with Martha: "Yes, Lord. I do believe that you have the power to raise us up to eternal glory." Dear friends, all things are passing. God alone suffices, and never forget: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

Monsieur Dempsey