

LENT
2017

Proclaim Westminster
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LENTEN PROGRAMME 2017
WEEK FIVE
“Meeting Mercy”
The Raising of Lazarus



GATHERING

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects. Through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

OPENING PRAYER:

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE – Living our Faith

Many of us have stood at a funeral, faced an open grave, watched the curtains close around a coffin, buried the ashes of one we loved. We know what it's like to feel the turmoil of emotions that come with that experience. We may have spent time with someone suffering the illness that will end in death, may have been the one who cared for someone suffering. Or we may have had the shock of a sudden death. Often these experiences have changed us in some way, have made us look at life and death differently.

Pope Francis tells us, "...we see the particular importance of the moment of death. The Church has always experienced this dramatic passage in the light of Christ's resurrection, which opened the way to the certainty of the life to come. ... Yet death must be faced and prepared for as a painful and inescapable passage, yet one charged with immense meaning, for it is the ultimate act of love towards those we leave behind and towards God whom we go forth to meet." (Misericordia et Misera 15)

Please take a few moments to reflect on the following question.

Recall your own experiences of illness and death of those you love, thinking particularly of your reactions and emotions.

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES

John 11. 1-45

There was a man named Lazarus who lived in the village of Bethany with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and he was ill. It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. The sisters sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill.' On receiving the message, Jesus said, 'This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.'

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judaea.'

On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. When Martha heard that Jesus had come she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you.' 'Your brother' said Jesus to her 'will rise again.' Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'; 'Yes Lord,' she said 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.'

Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!' But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?' Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha said to him 'Lord by now he will smell; this is the fourth day.' Jesus replied 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said:

'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I knew indeed that you always hear me. But I speak for the sake of all these who stand round me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me.' When he, had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.'

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him.

Please take a few moments in silence to reflect on the passage,

REFLECT AND RESPOND

This Gospel of the Fifth Sunday of Lent is our-last step on the journey towards the events of Holy Week, the culmination of a series of Sunday gospels touching on choices, on change, on water, on light and on life — a reflection on our baptismal journey, and the journey of our catechumens, now the Elect, towards Baptism at the Easter Vigil. This week, we encounter the tomb of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, and a friend of Jesus. In just two weeks we will be at another tomb, an empty one, singing alleluias, in faith, at the joy of resurrection.

Themes of glory and belief run through this passage. Jesus says, 'This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.' Martha, on being told that her brother 'will rise again', says, almost like a lesson learnt, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus' reply: "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die..." offers a challenge to Martha, to face, to recognise, to articulate who Jesus is. She does not fail, all her experiences, conversations, observations of Jesus have led her to say, "Yes, Lord, believe ..."

So much of our own human experience of loss is here. Jesus, manifesting the humanity that we often fail to recognise, is in "great distress", he sighs from the heart and finally weeps.

Let us never allow ourselves to be robbed of the hope born of faith in the Risen Lord. We are often sorely tested, but we must never lose our certainty of the Lord's love for us. His mercy finds expression also in the closeness, affection and support that many of our brothers and sisters can offer us at times of sadness and affliction. The drying of tears is one way to break the vicious circle of solitude in which we often find ourselves trapped.

Maybe in this narrative we see what have been our own first steps in being able to respond to the challenges living the Christian life offers us. If I have a sure and certain faith that Jesus IS the resurrection and the life, and that, because of that, all the glory of God is revealed to me, will have the courage, strength and determination to live as Christ as shown me to live. When Jesus says "Unbind him, let him free" perhaps we can see ourselves too in Lazarus. What are the bands that bind us?

What temptations, secrets, blindness, fears prevent us from the life that Jesus calls us to live. Maybe grief, anxiety, resentments, practical problems of life have held us in the tomb. Jesus calls to us too today "Come out", be set free. And what of the crowd that surrounds this action, trying to work out what's going on? Some are brought to belief, others to questioning and rejection. Have we been part of that crowd too, helping to release 'Lazarus' and going back to our lives transformed, believing, experiencing new life or being critical, suspicious, cynical?

How and when have I felt somewhat like Lazarus, bound and trapped in the tomb?
How and when have I been part of the crowd, standing around and watching rather than responding to need?

We may have had moments or experiences in our lives which have led us to answer as Martha answered, "Yes, Lord. I believe". How has this transformed us?

Spend some time meditating on the Stations of the Cross, pondering on the faces of the people that surround Jesus on this journey, but focusing on the central face, the face of Christ himself.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of Life and Love, inspire us to be prophetic witnesses to Christ, the resurrection and the life. Help us to break free from all that binds us, all that prevents us from living out the call of our baptism. Open our hearts to be transformed by your invitation to new life. Give us the courage to respond and the wisdom to know how. Through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Acknowledgement:
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Diocese of Westminster