

Lent 5

1. Lent has gone so quickly. Here we are in its fifth week. Next Sunday is Psalm Sunday, and then there is Easter. When we look back at the Gospels of Lent, we see the following. The Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent was that of Jesus in the desert being challenged by Satan and overcoming him. The second Sunday was the story of the Transfiguration. The third was the Gospel of the Samaritan woman at the well. Last Sunday was the story of the man born blind. And today is the resurrection of Lazarus. If we look at these last two Gospels, we see people who are brought to believe in Jesus. The Samaritan woman finally realizes who this man is who is asking her for water, and the man born blind finally comes to accept Jesus as the Son of God. And today we see Martha and Mary—and Lazarus--learning to believe in Jesus' power even over death.

2. This last gospel for today of course leads us into the passion and death of the Lord. Jesus' raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel was the final straw for his enemies. They had to remove such a man. It also focuses on the Easter message itself, the resurrection, although we should note the difference between what happened to Lazarus and what will happen to the Lord. We speak loosely of Lazarus

being resurrected, but that is not correct, because resurrection means moving into a totally new kind of existence. But Lazarus was restored to life here and now and would have to die later on. On the other hand, we really can't talk of his being resuscitated, because that word usually refers to someone whose heart has stopped for a moment or two but is then brought back into functioning. That was not the case with Lazarus. He was dead and entombed for four days when the Lord restored him to life. So I don't know what word we should use to describe what has happened to him. It was more than a resuscitation but less than a resurrection. It was a return from death to life in the world of space and time. But at the same time it is a preparation for belief in resurrection, for it teaches us that Jesus has power over death.

3. Look at the traits attributed to Jesus in this Gospel. Look at the fact that it describes him as loving Martha and Mary and Lazarus. When Lazarus falls sick, his sisters send word to Jesus and say: "the one you love is ill." And the Gospel goes on to say: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." Most of us think of Jesus as loving everybody, and this is undoubtedly correct. But here we have an example of Jesus' love for three individuals. If we want to use our imagination, we could picture their household as a place where the Lord would go when he was tired and needed

some rest and, of course, some good food and the company of people whom he loved. A place of refuge, we might call it, His retreat. His hiding place away from the public eye. Do we think of Jesus this way? If we don't, what are we going to do with this description of him as just such a person, a person with friends whom he loved.

4. We also see Jesus here as someone deeply moved by the grief of his friends. When he sees Mary and those with her weeping, this Gospel tells us that he became perturbed and deeply troubled. He asks where they have put the dead man, and they tell him, "Come and see." And then we have that short sentence: "And Jesus wept." How should we understand his weeping? Is he grieved over the human situation which leads inexorably to death? Is he grieved over the pain which death causes in those who lose a loved one? Or is it his own grief at the loss of his friend Lazarus that causes him to cry? That does not seem to be the case, because Jesus already knows what he is going to do. I think we might be right to say that Jesus is touched by the sorrow of Martha and Mary. For that squares with other Gospel passages which tell us that he was deeply moved by the sight of the crowds who followed him because they seemed so lost—like sheep without a shepherd.

5. Does our image of Jesus correspond to the image given us in this story? Do we see him as a compassionate friend, someone moved to tears when confronted with the grief of his friends? Or is our image of him more wooden, colder? Do we see him as a great warrior king whom no one could challenge in action or in word? And how do we imagine his relationship with us? Would we let Jesus bend over us in sympathy? Would we let him put his hand on our shoulder and say things that would help us face whatever difficulties life offers us? If we cannot imagine him in this way, then we need to go back and meditate on today's Gospel which presents Jesus to us as this kind of person. We need to change our understanding of him. We need to put ourselves into this scene. We need to identify with the sisters Martha and Mary, We need to watch Jesus cry.