

The Fifth Sunday of Lent.

“Jesus wept”.

We could easily be making a mistake if we think that Jesus wept because he was sad or suffering grief. Yes, Jesus was like us in all things except sin and he felt the pain of loss that death brings and he would have felt keenly the grief that Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, were expressing. We know that Mary, Martha and Lazarus had a special place in Jesus’ affection and that they were always ready to offer him hospitality.

It is true that Jesus suffered loss and bereavement but these tears were different. In the Gospel he wept twice. Once when he came down the Mount of Olives and saw the view of Jerusalem. Then, he was moved with tears because he could see so clearly the continuing refusal of the people who lived there to accept the gift of life that God was always offering. This time, it was the same feeling of frustration and angry disappointment that made him weep. He had been met by Martha when he arrived at Bethany and the meeting was a mixed blessing. Martha was slightly arrogant and gave Jesus a hard time when they met ‘If you had been here my brother would not have died’. She believed that he could have prevented Lazarus’ death but Martha could not bring herself to accept that Jesus had power over death. Things were a bit more hopeful when Mary met Jesus. Mary was ready to listen to him and she threw herself down at Jesus’ feet but then she somehow weakened her hope and trust in him and started to cry with the others around her. It was at this point that Jesus’ felt the distress which grew out of his frustration and disappointment and then wept himself. But, unlike Mary and the others, he was not crying as a public display of grief; these were tears that welled up from his love for human beings and his constantly frustrated desire that they should accept and trust him. Both Martha and Mary, in their own ways had come so far but they could not reach the point of full faith in him and a readiness to profess that he was the resurrection and the life.

“I am the resurrection and the life’ he said and then he asked them the question which he asks us. ‘Do you believe this?’ At the end of this Gospel we are told that following the return of Lazarus from the grave, many of the Jews who came to visit Mary believed in Jesus. There is no mention that Mary, and certainly not Martha, had come to faith in him. No wonder he wept. He was radiant and bursting with the love God his Father had sent him to bring and so many were closed to it. Even his friends Martha and Mary. It was consistent because in other places in the Gospel we hear how those who were close to him could not bring themselves to believe but, instead, thought he was out of his mind.

Lazarus became a prisoner of the tomb and was bound in the trappings and apparel of death. Even before he was revived he heard the voice of Jesus calling him and telling him to come out of the tomb. As he emerged, St. John tells us that he was wrapped in the grave clothes which Jesus told them to unbind so that he could be free. In two weeks time we shall hear how Jesus himself rose from death and left those same grave clothes behind because, unlike Lazarus, he would never need them again. Death had no power over him anymore.

In John’s Gospel it was this event that finally pushed the Jews to plot Jesus’ eventual death, which would in the words of the high priest Caiaphas, gather into unity the scattered children of God.

With this Gospel and the our celebration of Mass today we join Jesus in his journey to the Cross and, following the example of Lazarus, we go into the tomb with him. Only to rise with him on the third day so that Paul can say that when we are baptised we go into the tomb with him in order to rise with him.

The experience of Lazarus and Jesus' weeping over the resistance of Martha and Mary, reminds us that while Baptism takes us into the tomb with Jesus in order to bring us a share in his resurrection and life giving spirit, there is still a danger that we might still be wrapped in the apparel of death and that we might still be choosing the way of death rather than life. Let me explain.

St. Paul says that people who are interested in unspiritual things cannot be pleasing to God. The prayer that we say today for those who are preparing for Baptism, which is called 'the Scrutiny' talks about the 'death dealing power of evil.' As we prepare to enter the tomb with Jesus in order to rise with him, we are called to turn away from those things within us which close us to full faith and trust in Christ.

Back to Martha and Mary again. My theory is that Jesus wept because they could not go the extra mile. They could not let go of their own ways, solutions or personal controls. They felt there was too much to lose if they actually admitted that Jesus alone was the source of all life and true life.

Now is the time to admit and confess that we are all the same. The Lord who is the Spirit gives us the courage and confidence to come to the fullness of faith. How do we resist that final abandonment and trust? How can we be like those Jews who came to visit Mary and who came to believe in him?

We do it by letting go and renewing our belief that only Jesus is the way to life. The risen life and Holy Spirit, which is God's gift to us in Baptism, is the way to human life to the full.

We do it by letting go of our commitments and entering fully into the celebration of the Lord's passion, death and resurrection in the liturgy of the Church.

We do it by letting go of those habits and practices which grow out of self-reliance and fear. The things we call sins. Those things will be found in the areas of life where we do not have trust in God; where we seek after power, pleasure and self-aggrandisement without proper regard or respect for the others who share our lives; we do it when we misuse our personal gifts and the gifts of creation for self centred pleasure and satisfaction; we do it when we refuse to give time to prayer; we do it when we are seduced into thinking that the way of our world to find satisfaction and life in power, possessions and pleasure is the way we should follow.

"Though your body may be dead it is because of sin, but if Christ is in you then your spirit is life itself because you have been justified; and if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his spirit living in you."