

This is a hard reading to hear, not only because the narration can be a challenge to follow, but perhaps mostly because it's about a subject that makes us uncomfortable—a loved one dying. And it's a story full of people who are upset; everyone is either crying, disappointed or perturbed. In this emotionally-charged narrative, we're given the shortest verse in all the Bible: *Lacrimatus est Jesus* (v.35)—“*Jesus wept*”. Some say he wept because he grieved the death of a friend. But more correctly, it's because death was destroying their faith in him.

St. John's Gospel, from which this story comes, includes accounts of Jesus' miracles, but in this Gospel, they are more commonly understood or referred to as 'signs', rather than just miracles, and there are seven of them. The reason is that St. John wants us to understand these 7 miraculous events as signs that point to something beyond the miracle itself. These signs are to help us understand 'who' Jesus really is, which is much more than just a miracle worker.

So today's reading, the Raising of Lazarus—the sign given in order to reveal that he is the Resurrection and the Life—brings us to a pivotal point in St. John's Gospel. It's the seventh of these signs; the last and the greatest. And ironically, this seventh sign—Jesus' act of restoring life—will serve as the last straw for those who would now put into play, a plan to end his life.

And like the two lengthy Gospel readings from the past two weeks—the woman of Samaria at the well and the man born blind—today's Gospel is meant to reveal the movement toward faith. Even those closest to Jesus struggled to believe; they 'sort-of' believed; even if they saw the miracles or signs, they failed to see what the signs pointed to. This Gospel shows us that faith—that is, believing that Jesus is Resurrection and the Life—is something one must grow into.

To move them toward faith, Jesus took his time before going to Bethany and respond to the news of Lazarus' illness. Because although he had said, “*This illness is not to end in death*” and “*I am the resurrection and the life*” no one truly believed: not the disciples, not Martha, not Mary...no one. Death had conquered their hearts. He took his time to make the sign all the more clear: that he had the power to give life. So by the time he arrived, not only had Lazarus gone from sickness to death, he was four days dead. No one would have doubted that he was truly and completely dead. And Jesus saw the power of death over all those he was trying to lead to faith. So troubled was his heart, that he wept.

We might think of this story is simply about Jesus restoring life. That's the surface meaning, you could say, but like Martha, Mary and all the others, if that's what we get from it, we don't completely get it. This story is not so much about Lazarus' restored life, because Lazarus would still die eventually. Instead this story is about Jesus' declaration that he is the Resurrection. Let us remember that Resurrection is not life simply life restored to what it was; it's about life transformed and life altogether different—life dialed up to a higher pitch. This miracle, this sign, is to help us see beyond the miracle and understand that Jesus came not to abolish death to this life, because we all will face it, but to help us transcend it.

And as much as any people at any time, we need to believe this, especially as people who live in what Saint John Paul II called a culture death: a culture of legalized abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment; of too many military conflicts; the selling of women and children, like slaves.

Or in any way ours is a culture that cares only, or even primarily, about this life—its comforts, its rewards. But also for whatever way we bear so many signs of a culture that is dead in its faith, having bought into the message that says there is no God, and even if there it, it doesn't really matter. For whatever way we're spiritually lazy or spiritually dead, I wonder if it would lead Jesus to weep?

But just as these stories in John's Gospel reveal that true faith in Jesus is acquired gradually, so is our movement toward the transformed life he gives. That movement began at our Baptism. On that day, the water poured over us and the Sacred Chrism with which we were anointed served as a sign to something beyond the mere gestures themselves; something even greater than what Lazarus experienced in his restored life. Ours was truly a transformed existence. But that was only a beginning.

And this Gospel calls to mind another sacrament. St. Augustine saw this narrative as a symbol for what happens in confession. Just as Lazarus was unbound and freed from the tomb, “...when you confess (your sins), you come forth, emerging from where you once were hidden (in darkness)” (In Ioannis Evangelium, 49,24). Calling to mind the words of Jesus himself: “...whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 18:18). As we move toward Easter, please make sure you free yourself whatever is binding you to spiritual death.

But this Gospel also has a connection to the Eucharist. In a few minutes, in his Eucharistic presence, Jesus will beckon us forward, out of whatever ways we are spiritually dead, out of our tombs. He calls us forward, just as he did Lazarus, commanding death to “*Untie (us) and let (us) go*”.

Our Baptism, when we first became part of that resurrected life; the liberation from our sins that comes with Reconciliation; and the Eucharist are all living signs that point and move us toward where Jesus is trying to lead us—something greater than this life. Are we ready to wake up(!) and to allow him to unbind us?