

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

[*Ezekiel 37: 12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8: 8-11; John 11: 1-45*]

As I turned on the radio recently, I found myself tuned in to an interview. It was with a University of Alberta professor of psychology, if I'm not mistaken. Like just about every other interview these days, this one was about COVID-19. I heard the professor speaking about what he called the science-free noise that is all around us. He was referring to the voices that say things like we are not in a pandemic crisis, or it is all a hoax, or that promote strange remedies that will cure the virus. He spoke of the importance of not paying attention to this science-free noise and to listen instead to medical and scientific voices that we know we can trust to tell us the truth. Sound advice.

Today's Gospel passage from St. John speaks to another kind of noise that we are contending with right now, not a science-free but a faith-free noise. This babble doesn't come at us from outside. It is within, a faith-free racket that goes by the names of fear, worry, anxiety and dread. These inner voices are very loud right now, and seem only to be growing in volume as the virus count climbs, the economy weakens, and people lose their jobs. It is hard not to listen to that noise, and many people are finding it a real challenge to their faith. Well, along the lines of the advice given by the Professor, I'd like to invite all of us to turn away for a moment from the faith-free noise and listen to the voice we know is trustworthy, the voice of the Lord Jesus that comes to us through the Gospel. Let's consider carefully what the sacred text offers us.

To begin, if tough times are weakening our faith in Jesus, we can see ourselves reflected in the person of Martha. She is in a bad way. Her brother Lazarus is dead and buried. She cries out to Jesus, and right away he asks her to believe in his power to give life. "I am the resurrection and the life," he says. Then he asks "Do you believe this?" She says a fervent yes – "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world" - but then immediately afterward expresses doubt. When Jesus asks that the stone be rolled away, she says, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." What this shows is that, even as Martha expresses her belief in the power of Jesus, she is at the same doubtful that he can change things.

In our own difficult circumstances, it is very easy to relate to Martha. We believe, and yet struggle to believe. The repercussions of COVID-19 have left dead and in the tomb our presuppositions, certainties, and hopes. We are like Lazarus, too, feeling bound by our powerlessness and buried under the weight of worry. Yes, we know that God has the power to summon us forth out of these sepulchres. After all, that was the ancient promise made through Ezekiel, and the assurance given by St. Paul. Nevertheless, though we believe, we are at the same time sorely tempted to doubt. Will Jesus really act to save me? Can he change things? The faith-free noise within us continues to echo.

But that noise diminishes in volume as we remain with the Gospel text. Pay close attention to the way Martha and her sister Mary send word to Jesus to tell him that Lazarus is seriously sick. What they say is this: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are very close friends of Jesus, so the two women refer to their brother as the one whom Jesus loves. That same description applies to each and every one of us. We are the people that Jesus

loves. Accepting this as true is where faith begins. We either believe that he loves us, or we don't. And if we do believe this, then we know that he will never abandon us, he will always carry us, he will never let us go.

Consider next how Jesus reacted to the news. He delayed – deliberately! On a purely human level, this strikes us as strange. If he really did love his friend, why didn't he run to him right away to save him. But there is something more here, a mystery that we need to come to terms with as we find our faith challenged. Allow me to explain.

Think about some of the things we are grappling with. We keep hearing people say that we are living in an unprecedented situation, and that's true, of course, at least in the lifetime of most of us. We have no sure reference points for decision-making, no clear bearings for setting our direction. Control escapes us, and we cannot see where all this is heading. That's worrisome. Rapid solutions are also non-existent. Since we have come to expect instantaneous response to our needs, time delays add to the anxiety. All of this bears down upon us mightily as we struggle to keep our faith. How does the delay of Jesus help us here?

Well, in short, his deliberate delay reminds us who is in control. Listen again to what Jesus says to explain why he did not react immediately to the summons of Martha and Mary: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." When Jesus acts in our lives, it is always for our ultimate good, certainly, but also always in accord with God's saving plan for us, the faithful fulfillment of which gives God glory. This means that Jesus's loving intervention in our lives may very well not accord with our expectations. In fact, it usually doesn't; he is the God of surprises. So if Jesus does not act in the way we want and in the timeframe we expect, that does not mean he is disinterested or not paying attention. It does mean that he is in control, and we aren't; it means that, even if we may not know what we are doing, he surely does. He knows what is best for us, and will act at the moment and in the way determined by our Heavenly Father.

So, as we engage this message of the Gospel, we realize that Jesus is putting some questions to us, just as he did with Martha. They are not a test but an invitation to deeper trust. The question posed to Martha - "Do you believe this?" – becomes for us: "Do you believe that I love you, that all things are in my control, that I see where things are headed, and that I *will* act – in your present circumstances and at the moment I know is right - to protect you, and guide you to a future full of hope?" "Do you believe this?"

As we turn to the Eucharist, we encounter the real presence of the One who in wondrous power called Lazarus forth from the grave and restored him to life. We meet the Lord Jesus, who summoned us time and again not to be afraid, and to place our full trust, with complete confidence, in his love and in the love of the Father. We come to our crucified and risen Saviour, who shows clearly by his resurrection from the dead that there is no circumstance, no hardship, no evil stronger than his love or beyond his power to change. Let us ask Jesus to summon us from the tomb of fear, unloose the bonds of anxiety and fill us with the life of faith, so that we can tune out the faith-free noise and give our full surrender to his love and never-failing providence. In this way we can know, even now, the peace and the joy he wills for us.

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St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)
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