

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Jesus snorted

There is a unique harmony in the four gospels about the sisters of Bethany, Martha and Mary. Both in the Lucan story (10:38 - Martha crashing around in the kitchen, and Mary on the floor with her back to the sofa) and in today's dramatic episode (John 11) the sisters come across as real, consistent, very different characters. We can also see a real difference in Jesus' reaction to each of them.

Martha

She comes out very simply as soon as she hears Jesus is near. She's got words to say to him, and she's not one to keep her light under a bucket. So before he is well into the village she is favouring him with her views, her pain, and the unhidden reproach: "*If you had been here, he wouldn't have died!*" We all have the urge to make others responsible for our griefs, to unload them, if we can, on another person: "It's all *your* fault!" Jesus knows this, and he is gentle, but firm. *He will rise again*, he says. I am nearly sure that she is less than patient with this. *I know - at the Last Day...thank-you very much!* Jesus says simply, in the present, not the future tense, *I AM the resurrection and the life*. Martha knows that she cannot argue with him, and simply professes her faith and trust in him; and now she has done, and she goes to tell Mary that he has arrived.

Mary

Mary has stayed in the house. She is Mary; outwardly contemplative and calm. She waits, until she is called: but on hearing Jesus' name she is instantly on her feet. We can see how exactly his coming relates to her mourning state: he is the one she has been waiting for, the one she has to go to. She too has to pour out the same reproachful faith as her sister, but she does it from the floor, falling at his feet in the attitude of worship; and unlike Martha she does not presume to suggest that "*Even now what you ask of God, he will grant*". Yet it is when Jesus sees her tears, and those of her companions, that he is gripped with an overpowering emotion, and *snorts like a horse* (this isn't a rude exaggeration on my part: it is what the Greek word says). It is a sudden, violent, shuddering gasp of breath that bursts from

his lips. I have always found it a most powerful moment: John, who hardly ever lets us know what anyone is feeling, suddenly gives us the image of Jesus shaken by an uncontrollable physical emotion. And mixed in with the grief and shock, there is certainly pure *anger* that the power of darkness has dared to lay its hand on one that Jesus loves.

Lazarus

is that one, and unlike his sisters, he goes almost completely undescribed; indeed, in today's Gospel he appears dramatically veiled and bound in the grave-clothes. We are not meant to see in him a recognisable other character; I'm sure John does not simply *forget* to say what he is like. The silence is deliberate: he is *the one Jesus loves*, and in that, he is you, he is me, he is the one we love, and the Saviour of the world has come to our grave, and is stirred speechless with anger by our enslavement, our burial, our broken and deadened plight.

"Take away the stone!"

What a ghastly thought this is – and not only in the narrative. To lift a stone is never a savoury experience, and this one is certain to be concealing corruption; but what about our own dead and buried lives? All those slaughtering experiences from our past, the disappointments, the abandoned hopes and wasted dreams; we have trodden this path to the grave, we have emptied so many of the gifts of God into oblivion. Dare we remove the stone? We "do the decent thing" with our damaged and unfulfilled lives: we shelve our lost hopes, turn from our dead ends, try to think about something else, try to pretend that nothing has been lost. But indeed it has: something dies in us when we are deeply disappointed, a little of our innocence perishes, and our power to hope takes another knock. So it is when we stand before this grave with Jesus. Shall we take the stone away, and face ourselves, and show ourselves to God? It is like the dramatic moment when God himself asks Ezekiel, as he stands in the desolate valley full of dry bones: "*Son of Man, can these bones live?*" We can answer, in Lent, with the submissive words of the prophet: "*You know, O Lord.*" *Fr Philip*