

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Take The Stone Away

The closeness of today's Gospel of Lazarus to the Paschal Feast day should alert us to a precise relationship between two deaths: that of Jesus, and that of Lazarus, his friend.

“The One You Love Is Ill!”

Thus the sisters summon Jesus to Lazarus in his hour of need; and his failure to arrive is incomprehensible to all. How can he stay away? What does his absence mean? Jesus himself tells us: *he is waiting for Lazarus to die*, before he comes to his side - “because now you will believe.”

“Are you returning to Judaea?”

Judaea means mortal danger for Jesus; and here the disciples might have found an understandable motive for his staying away. But Jesus will come - in his own time, for ends which he chooses. The Gospel is establishing the link between Jesus' loyalty to his dead friend and his going to the Cross. His free decision to go to Bethany for Lazarus' sake *will* bring him close to his own death. Unlike Lazarus, he remains in control of his destiny. He is coming, not to be a good friend, but to be the Saviour of Lazarus, of Martha and Mary, and of all of us.

A Dispassionate Account

There is no detectable emotion, to my mind, in the Fourth Gospel's account of the death of Jesus. If you seek it out and read it, you will find it the most matter-of-fact telling, with no sensationalism, no appeal to the reader's feelings. Whatever the Beloved Disciple gave to this Gospel, it was not measured in sentiment. Crucifixion was doubtless much realer to the Evangelist than it is to us; he *could* have painted a picture laden with compassion, horror, or outrage. He decides to tell it with no emotion at all. By contrast, the story of the raising of Lazarus is awash with emotion, not only in the family of the dead man, but in the crowd of mourners, and above all in the heart of Jesus itself. But it is not emotion that brings Jesus to this grave, nor is his act a deed of mere friendship. *He opened the blind man's eyes. Could he not have prevented this man's death?* Yes; and similarly, God could have arranged the whole Creation without the presence of death - but did not. Jesus never differs from the Father!

Coming To The Grave

Both halves of the Fourth Gospel culminate in the setting of a graveyard. In both cases there is a stone to be rolled away. Lazarus' stone is a *cordon sanitaire*; it encloses corruption; its remaining where it has been put is desirable, essential. The stone over Jesus' sepulchre, instead, has been “moved away from the tomb” when Mary of Magdala arrives. Like Martha, she too is devastated by the thought. Only impropriety could result from the disturbance of a tomb. So there is intense dramatic power in the sudden demand of Jesus in today's Gospel: *Take away the stone!*

The Culminating Sign

The first half of the Fourth Gospel is known as “the Book of Signs”: it is built around those special public acts of Jesus which reveal his nature and his purpose. The raising of Lazarus comes as the last of these; at this moment he is displaying his closeness to the Father, and his love - not only for suffering, but even for *dead*, humanity. On Ash Wednesday we accepted the pilgrimage of Lent because we know that God never changes his mind about what he creates. In the second half of the Gospel Jesus will display the power of God, as he finally defeats the power of death. In both halves of the Gospel, it is the scene in the graveyard that is the climax of the whole story.

Still, Only A Sign

However, the Biblical structure is strictly followed. Lazarus is not welcomed into the world of the Resurrection. He is merely resuscitated to his former life; he is merely a sign, and not the reality, of what God will accomplish in the fulness of time, at the end of “the Book of Glory”. The apprehension of the Resurrection will demand huge trust, (Jesus says: “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe!”) even a sort of self-denial (Mary Magdalene is told “Do not cling to me...”); and it is not a concession to our sentiments, a mere sticking-plaster that comforts a bad moment: it is an act of divine justice and love, an act of God in the full sense, which is greater than our needs or our understanding; for whose transformation we must prepare by a good Lent.
Fr Philip