

## ***John 11: 1-45***

### **The Gift Of Life Is The Son's To Give**

In a moment of bitter controversy over the right of Jesus to work on the Sabbath day, the Jews accused him of claiming equality with God - blasphemy. This was his reply:

**Jn 5: 21-29** As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses; for the Father judges none; he has entrusted all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father. Whoever refuses honour to the Son refuses honour to the Father who sent him. In all truth I tell you, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the One who sent me, has eternal life. Without being brought to judgment, he has passed from death to life. In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming - in fact, it is already here - when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and, because he is the Son of Man, has granted him power to give judgment. Do not be surprised at this: for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice: those who did good will come forth to life, and those who did evil will come forth to judgment.

This is the *teaching* of Jesus. Our Gospel today gives this teaching in the form of a *sign*.

### **The Technique of John**

The two previous weeks have shown us the technique of John: to take superficial things and to sink into the depths of their meaning, until the world of surface reality yields to the truth of God which lies hidden. In this week's story we see this symbolism at work in the disciples' misunderstanding when Jesus says: *Our beloved Lazarus is sleeping; I am going to wake him*, meaning: *Lazarus is dead: I am going to raise him*. All through the story we find the surface of reality being shattered, as Jesus plunges into the depth of what is happening. Martha understands that Jesus is the one she is waiting for; but she hasn't understood that *he is life itself*. She acknowledges a future resurrection, without knowing that *Jesus is the resurrection*. Martha and Mary display grief and regret, which Jesus shares: but Jesus displays a shuddering *anger* that is deeper than his tears. The awesome command: *Take away the stone!* is the moment where Jesus leaves Martha behind (her tentative remark *Even now, whatever you ask of God he will give you* has not prepared her for this).

## The Meaning of the Sign

To the modern reader there is one question which stands out. John makes the raising of Lazarus the trigger for the Jewish authorities' final decision to engineer Jesus' death. The other three Gospels do not even mention Lazarus, nor do they describe this final decisive miracle which seals Jesus' fate. What is the historical truth of the matter?

There is no more reason to doubt that Jesus raised Lazarus in John, than to doubt that he raised the widow's son at Nain in Luke. What makes John special is that he so exalts the influence of this sign in the progress towards the crisis. What we are seeing is another example of the genius of the Fourth Gospel in presenting the truth about Jesus. Luke tells us that, when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, the people were praising Jesus "for all the mighty miracles they had seen". The Fourth Gospel is not satisfied with such a general statement. It does not seem enough, to say that there were many miracles, and that they inspired awe in some and hatred in others. So John takes *one sign* and makes it the prime representative of "all the mighty miracles". It is of a piece with the way John selects only a very few (seven) miracles, and follows each of them with a discourse to spell out its meaning. With a superb sense of development he has chosen for this pre-eminent place and function the sign of Jesus raising a dead man. This makes it an ideal transition between the Book of Signs (Jn 1 - 12) and the Book of Glory (Jn 13 - 21), where the reality of what was signified comes into being.

This establishes the pattern in the Gospel, noted in our study tonight, where the two halves of the book both end with a scene beside a tomb: Lazarus' raising as the last of the Signs, and the deserted Holy Sepulchre as the realisation of glory.

What makes the story supremely eloquent is the irony: that it is the giving of life to man that leads inexorably to the death of Jesus. John is teaching us in full light something dimly-known in the Synoptic Gospels. When Jesus reaches out to touch the leper in Mk 1: 40ff, the leper is healed by the contact. But Jesus finds that the healing makes him so famous that he can no longer go into any town safely, and has to stay in desert places where nobody lives; and even there great crowds flock to find him. In this way the outcast leper is repatriated, and Jesus becomes an outcast. In the discussion about whether to return to Judaea at the beginning of our story, the disciples spell out the fact that Jesus endangers his life by returning to where Lazarus has died: so much so that Thomas says to the others, *Let us go too, and die with him*. The point is resumed at the end of our chapter, where the ironic question is asked in the Sanhedrin,

Here is this man working all these signs: what action are we taking?

That they answer with the resolution that Jesus should die so that the nation should not perish is the ultimate irony, and John takes it up:

As High Priest he prophesied that Jesus was to die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but to gather together into one the scattered children of God