

The Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 11: 1-45

The third Mass of Scrutiny chooses a Gospel which sets the deepest ground for reflection and prayer. The Woman at the Well explored desire, both thwarted and fulfilled. The Man Born Blind meditated on the inexorable alliance between vision and faith. But this Gospel is about life itself.

When St Paul wanted to find the ground on which he would set his apostolic feet, he wanted to find a place which would have the reach, and the room, to accommodate the whole human world. He knew he would have to break out of the narrow Jewish world where Pharisee, Essene, and Sadducee slogged it out to decide the meaning of Moses. He knew he must find the religious ground where humanity itself could unite. He found it in the mystery of death, and its surrogate, sin. .

Matthew's Gospel is deeply Jewish. Jesus' genealogy starts with Abraham, and Matthew presents him as a new and greater Moses, and the Old Testament keeps outcropping in the text, like the rocks in Monument Valley. But John's Gospel goes back further: he begins with Creation, and sets Jesus the Word in relationship not with Hebrew reality, but with "all that came to be". (Paul would have loved John's Gospel, had he lived another thirty years to read it.)

What we have in this week's Gospel reading is the culminating sign of the ministry of Jesus. He delays coming to Lazarus, not because he does not care about him, but because he can be of more use to Lazarus - and to those who mourn Lazarus - and to his disciples - and to us who read the Gospel - if he waits until Lazarus is dead. Why is this?

Firstly, Jesus says: *Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad I was not there, because now you will believe.* That people should believe is the most critical result of the coming of the Word of God in the flesh. Remember his words to Nicodemus:

No-one who believes in (the Son) will be judged;
but whoever refuses to believe is judged already
because he does not believe in the name of God's only Son.

And there is a much more impressive statement in 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 no-one; 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.

The great signs in the Gospel are the moments when those who see Jesus will believe in him. But, as we discovered last week, they do not only provoke belief: they also *display glory*.

This culminating sign, therefore, may be expected not only to create faith most convincingly, but also to display glory most clearly. In Jn 5: 28 we heard Jesus refer to himself clearly as the Son of God (*the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God*); here he does it again, and these two places are the only ones in the Gospel where he uses this phrase of himself. When Jesus first hears that Lazarus is ill, he says:

This sickness will end, not in death, but in the glory of God:
and through it the Son of God will be glorified

This is a considerable advance on the line in Jn 9 about the Man Born Blind:

Neither he nor his parents sinned: he was born like this
so that the works of God might be revealed in him

and it introduces a precise theme of which we must take note. When John's Gospel talks about *the glorification of Jesus*, it normally refers directly to the Crucifixion. John is very particular in refusing to treat the glorification of Christ as something separate from, or subsequent to, the Cross; and he is not alone in this. Jesus himself responds to the request of James and John for "places at your right hand and your left in your glory" by referring to "the cup I must drink, and the Baptism with which I must be baptised" - that is, to the Passion. When they express willingness for these things, he promises they will share them; but he says that "the places on his right hand and his left have already been allotted by the Father", and the phraseology is repeated when the crucified criminals are described "one on his right hand, the other on his left"; which leaves us to conclude that the *glory* of Christ is actually the Cross. St Paul knows this linkage long before the Gospels are written, and speaks of *glorifying* "in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world."

Now, if the death of Lazarus is destined to end in *the glory of God and of the Son of God*, we can see at once why John couples the return of Jesus to Lazarus with his return into Judaea, where they had been "ready to stone him". *The decision to go to the tomb* is of paired significance: in going to Lazarus' grave he is faithful to Lazarus; but it will lead to his own death; and in going to his own grave he will be faithful to all of us. You can now read why Jesus' hour was not going to come because of healing on the Sabbath, or because of the cleansing of the Temple, as it does in the other Gospels: John has given us a crescendo of signs, which have converged more and more on the reality they signify, as the story moves closer and closer to the Passion. We have reached the end of the Book of Signs, which show the genuine ministry of signs which open people's eyes to the story that is unfolding amongst them. These signs reach their culmination in a graveyard: and the revelation of glory will reach its culmination in a graveyard.

We are now going to enter the Book of Glory, whereby Jesus will minister his glory to the Church and through us to the world. Then there will be no more signs: the reality will have succeeded the sign, the glory of God will be unveiled, and the Spirit will be liberated to enter the hearts of those who believe. So we have symmetry between the two halves of the Gospel: both halves end with a visit to the tomb: the first, to the tomb of Lazarus, gives us the culminating sign that Jesus is life itself. The second, to the tomb of Jesus, will present us with the fact of the Resurrection. Some people rather stupidly refer to the Resurrection as "Jesus' greatest miracle" - as if it were a sign of something else. The Resurrection isn't a sign of anything: it is the reality of Jesus, God and Man, having inherited on our behalf the divine glory which is our destiny. The adequate response is that of Thomas: "My Lord and my God", where for the only time in the New Testament a human being accords to Jesus the title "God".

A visit to the Prologue will show us the roots of our story there: Last week we saw -in a story which keeps showing parallels with the Lazarus story - that Jesus does not only *give* light: he *is* the Light of the World. So in the Prologue we find that life and light are two themes closely related:

That which came to be in him was life, and this life was the light of men. The light shines on in the darkness, for the darkness did not overcome it. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love; and of his fulness we have all had a share - love in place of love.

In our story Jesus gives not light but life: and the recipient of the gift is called “beloved” at every point in the story. The concept of “enduring love” (*charis, hesed*) is cognate with the “fulness” which characterises the effect of this love: it is the whole gift of life, which is God’s gift, which undercuts all other gifts. (That is why Jesus waits until Lazarus is dead.)

The theme of darkness is mentioned both here -

Are there not twelve hours of daylight? If a man goes walking by day, he does not stumble because he can see the light of this world. But if he goes walking at night he will stumble, because he has no light in him -

and in Jn 9 -

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no-one can work.

and we are unlikely to be wrong in thinking that John sees the cause of the light as bound up with Jesus’ life: as Judas leaves the Last Supper, we are told portentously: *Night had fallen*. When the forces arrayed against Jesus come to arrest him, uniquely John allies the Roman cohort with the Temple police; they come to the Garden bearing lanterns and torches because *they have no light in them*, and indeed John will even make them stumble as they fall backwards into darkness. This black-and-white scene of confrontation is completely intentional throughout the Gospel: the forces of life versus the forces of death. Every sign Jesus gives is a sign of what he is, and of what he wants to give to us; in no sign does he so approach the reality as in this giving of the gift of life itself. The life he gives Lazarus is not yet in the realm of eternity, but it is so close to it that we may say that in this sign Jesus and Lazarus tread the margin between earth and heaven.

Jesus’ Grief For Lazarus

There are some special words here. It is when he sees Mary weeping, surrounded by her fellow-mourners (v.33), *enebrimesato to pneumatī*: literally *he groaned in his spirit*: *kai etarassen eauton*: *and was convulsed within himself*. RE Brown translates:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had accompanied her also weeping, *he shuddered, moved with the deepest emotions*.

Can we draw the exact meaning from this verse? In the Old Testament the shuddering verb is always used in the sense of rage or anger. Why would Jesus display *anger* at this point, rather than pity or grief? Surely to differentiate his response from that of the sisters. There is, one feels, something here which belongs to Jesus’ divine mandate to give life. He is grieved as a man when he approaches the tomb of his beloved friend; but as the Son of God he finds his hackles rising because death has come so close to him, has laid its hand on one of us, for whom *he came that we might have life, and live it to the full*.