

Resurrection of Lazarus: Jesus is the Resurrection
Gospel of 5th Sunday of Lent
Jn 11:3-7.17.20-27.33-45

The *lectio*: what is the Word saying in itself

The importance of the account of the resurrection of Lazarus (= YHWH helps) is already indicated by the place it occupies in John's Gospel: it is a hinge between the first part (Jn 1-10) and the second part (Jn 11-20). Its overall significance **prefigures Jesus' resurrection**, of which Lazarus' resurrection is an anticipation and reveals the deep and surprising meaning of that death. On the path Jesus walks towards the Cross Lazarus' resurrection shines out as a promise: death is not the end, neither Jesus' death nor ours. In the Lazarus episode we find the theme of love and friendship Jesus had for Lazarus and a view of man with a response to the question: what does death lead to?

3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz'arus. 6 So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer[a] in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go into Judea again."

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Laz'arus had already been in the tomb four days. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life;[d] he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; 34 and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. 42 I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Laz'arus,

come out.” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

This passage on the resurrection of Lazarus, directly preparing for the paschal event, makes one of the fundamental aspects of Johannine Christology explicit. In the account we pass, in a slow crescendo, from a story about the illness (vv.1-6), to death and burial (vv.7-37), and then to the event of the resurrection. Jesus’ tender humanity shines out between the lines, he knows about weeping and sobbing (vv.33.35), confident friendship (vv.21-24.32.39s), but also the mystery of the divine sonship (vv.4-6.14-15.41ff.).

There are various people around the main actor in the scene, who is **Jesus**: the disciples, Martha and Mary, the Jews. **The disciples** play a secondary role: they introduce a brief catechesis on the Christian meaning of death. **The Jews** represent opposition to Jesus but they express a disquieting question: “was the one who cured the man born blind not able to do something to stop this man dying?”. **Mary** expresses the human affection in the drama: her weeping and being upset and Jesus’ weeping. **Martha** takes centre stage. She offers her ‘credo’ in Jesus: “Lord...you are the Christ (the Messiah expected by Judaism), the Son of God (Hellenistic Christological title), The One who is coming (eschatological title). Jesus tells her the most revealing item: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11,25).

Two dialogues develop in the text: one between Jesus and his disciples (vv.7-16); the other between Jesus and the sisters (vv. 17-37). In **the first dialogue** Jesus loves Lazarus but he does not run to cure him. *The second dialogue* develops Martha and Mary’s faith, but it is still not Christian faith. Jesus, while loving Lazarus, appears to abandon his friend to his destiny; he intends to let death do its work: “*This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it*” (11,4). With these words Jesus raises the earthly event to the level of God’s intention; the direction of the event is not towards death but towards hope. Lazarus’ illness is a place of revelation: the victory of life over death. To Jesus’ promise: “*your brother will rise again*”, Martha responds with Judaic hope: “*I know that he will rise on the last day*”. And Jesus replies with a revelation that is Christian hope. “*I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live; whoever lives and believes in me, will never die*” (11,25-26). Jesus is the only salvation and faith in him in is put in strong relief as the only and essential condition.

Understood in the text is a contrast between man’s life without Christ and life in Christ. The point of departure is earthly life (without Christ), whose natural destiny is death. But to this life marked by death, a new possibility is opened by faith in Christ: in faith the frontier of death can be overcome: “even if he dies he will live”. In faith the present life has a new strength in itself: “he will never die”. The loud cry with which Jesus calls forth Lazarus (v.43) has the force of the call to life of the first Adam (cf. Gen 2:7) and together the dramatic expiry on the part of the new Adam on the cross (cf. Lk 23:46). At Bethany (= “house of affliction”) God intervenes and helps. How? By mercifully bestowing himself and his life which is a ‘medicine’ for immortality.

The *meditatio*: what the Word is saying to me

1. **Faith in Christ beyond death.** In front of his friend's tomb, Jesus bursts into tears. It was not a loud weeping, but a serene one. He empathises with sorrow, not with desperation. Death remains a disturbing mystery which cannot be lessened in any way: Jesus too cries at the death of his friend (11,35), as he also felt lost at the immensity of the Cross (12:27ff.). Death, like the Cross, continues to be a scandal: you are before God who says he loves you but just the same he seems to abandon you. This too is something the story of Lazarus wants to illustrate.

Jesus weeps, demonstrating that he loves Lazarus deeply: "See how he loved him!" those present exclaim. But others are ironic: "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying*" (11:37). It is the mystery of human existence, loved by God but nevertheless abandoned to death. A mystery that is mirrored in the Cross and is resolved: death, like the Cross, is not a sign of God's abandonment. "Death for the Salesian is made bright by the hope of entering into the joy of his Lord" (C. 54).

2. **Jesus' love for his friends.** Jesus goes to Lazarus because his love for Lazarus and for every human being drives him. The reason for his journey is generous and faithful love for everyone. He is the one who walks in light, in God's reality, because he loves his brothers. "Whoever loves his brother, lives in light and does not stumble along the way" (1Jn 2:10). Love is the criterion that verifies whether we belong to God. Only the one who loves is open to God and his brothers, and in life can see, distinguish and penetrate the essential without being taken hold of by the ephemeral.

In Jesus, love wins out precisely because he does not save himself but dies for us. Love in fact, to conquer, must know how to lose: this is the fundamental law of the Christian. We cannot obtain something good for our young people without losing ourselves in love. The Salesian who loves will never be hindered from continuing to believe in love. Jesus is the icon of the Salesian's love for the young. But the Jesus of the Gospel asks us to renew our choice, "a choice made of truth, humanity, service", like his on behalf of his friend Lazarus, "that helps us discover God through the intense experience of God in Him and discover man through charity and mercy towards our confreres and the young" (P. Chavez).

The *oratio*: what is the Lord saying with this Word

Lord Jesus, you are our friend; we know that you love us much because because you often treat us like your friends at Bethany. How often in how many circumstances of Salesian life we call on you, and you do not come immediately. Your delay leaves us in difficulties. Your delays allow us to die.

But you know why. You know what is best for your friends. You know what is best for those you love. All ready to make us believe, lead us to a more mature faith and unflinching hope; to make us, like Don Bosco, hope against every hope. It is better that you weep with us than that we live tranquilly. It is better to die than rise when you call us forth. Lord Jesus when also in our misery we are like the dead decomposing, never let us stop believing that you can do all, because you want to as a result of your love and obedience to the Father.

The Father always listens to you because you are pleasing to him. You who are the life and share our daily dying, will always have us come out of the tomb, from all the tombs in which even our young people fall due to the weakness of our faith and of theirs. Amen.

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