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The Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)

Death touches us all. For some, life seems to be a constant encounter with death; for others, death comes rather infrequently, but either way death never is easy, nor is it the end.

To experience it changes everything and nothing is ever the same again, nor should it be, for the experience of death calls to mind our love and that of others. In the midst of death we very often feel completely alone, isolated, abandoned and yet surrounded by family and friends. Death leaves us quite vulnerable and utterly helpless.

A tragic or a sudden death - especially the death of a parent for a young child and the death of a young child for a parent - is the single greatest misery and pain that a person can endure. I say this with some authority: the experience forever changes a person, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

The Lord Jesus himself has experienced the agony of death; he knows well the emotions and the thoughts that we experience in death, because he himself suffered all of these at the death of his friend, Lazarus.

When at last he arrived at Bethany, Martha and Mary both cried out to him, "Lord, if you had been my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Martha seems to address him with a sense of deep faith in his power, for she then says to him, "[But] even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you" (John 11:22). Martha has not lost all hope; Mary has. Seeing the mournful tears of Mary Jesus then "became perturbed and deeply troubled" (John 11:33).

At this point in the Gospel we find one of those unfortunate instances where language becomes a difficulty. In Greek, the word we translate as "perturbed" actually says that Jesus "snorted in spirit." Jesus is not simply irritated or frustrated at what death has done to his friends, he has moved to anger because of what sin has done to his people. He feels our agony and he sees our powerlessness in the face of death and so, with a certain authority in his voice, he calmly demands, "Where have you laid him?" (John 11:34). Here in the midst of suffering and of death - standing near the tomb - Jesus acknowledges the very purpose for his coming among us: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

In his anger over the power of sin and its grip upon the human race Jesus exclaims

O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the LORD. I have promised, and I will do it (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

As Jesus looks upon us in his love and as he sees our desperate plight, he is moved with pity and moved again to anger until at last he calls for his beloved: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43).

Yet Jesus does not stop here, for Lazarus has only been restored to life - he has not shared in the glory of the Resurrection and Lazarus must die again. Jesus cannot leave us in such a deplorable condition. The anger that he feels when he looks upon our grief and shares in the agony of death impels him to turn his gaze anew to Jerusalem. Jesus sees each of us and he knows that we will suffer a physical death as a consequence of sin. Yet he still says, "Let us go back to Judea (John 11:7); "Let us go to him" (John 11:15); "Let us go to Jerusalem."

The Apostles know the danger of returning to Jerusalem and Thomas senses something of Jesus' mission when he says to the others, "Let us also go to die with him" (John 11:16). Having shared fully in our human experience Jesus longs to save us and free us from the power of death, but this he must do on the Cross. Before he heard of Lazarus' illness, Jesus said,

This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own" (John 10:17-18). Jesus becomes resolute in his desire to save us and seven days later Jesus enters Jerusalem to lay down his life so that we might live (see John 12:1, 12).

Before the power of Christ the Lord death has no power. Humanity was bound to death - was made subject to death - because of sin. When our first parents sinned against the Lord and chose their own wills over his own, the Lord God said to them, "By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). Confident in the power of the love of Christ Jesus, St. Paul mocks death, saying, "Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (I Corinthians 15:54-55). The love of Christ has conquered death because it has destroyed the power of sin and broken its hold on us.

By raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus foreshadows the greatness of his power that will be revealed when on the Last Day he raises all of our mortal bodies to the glory of the Resurrection. We can be confident that the Lord will reunite our bodies with our souls and we shall be like him in glory, for

"If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you" (Romans 8:11). The Spirit of God certainly dwells within us through the grace and power of the Sacrament of Baptism; he has promised and he will do it.

My dear Elect, you have listened to the words of the Redeemer and you have heard him call to you, "Come out of your sin and live!" You have, with him, come to detest sin and you long to share in the life that he promises to those who believe in him. With great joy we look forward to the day when you will be one with us. But before we bestow upon you the gift of the Spirit of God and the promise of eternal life, you must first go through this last scrutiny.