

Sunday Homily

5th SUNDAY OF LENT

29 MARCH 2020

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“Unbind him, let him go free.”

Illustration

In the chapel of New College, part of Oxford University in England, there is a sculpture by Jacob Epstein. The sculpture is of Lazarus being raised from the dead. It is a powerful and moving work. The artist has perfectly caught both the stiffness of the bound, dead body, and the life slowly returning to the limbs. Some of the grave bandages seem just about to slip off, others look as if they are about to be burst apart. Lazarus looks as if he has just stretched his neck for the first time after days in the tomb. His face has a strange but serene expression: a traveller who has just returned from the furthest destination, death.

Standing in the middle of the chapel looking back, you can see that the statue, made of white stone, is framed by a great dark wooden door. It looks like a tomb from which Lazarus has just emerged. The light stone glows quietly against the dark background. The viewer is struck by the sheer physical presence of the statue. This is not a ghost or a spirit; it conjures up the fact of Lazarus' physical revival. Yet the figure also looks bound, fragile, still subject to death. It seems to sum up many of the themes from today's Gospel. Although raised from the dead, Lazarus is still bound by the laws of nature and death. He cannot even undo the grave clothes. Jesus has to give the order: “Unbind him, let him go free.” Only Jesus has the authority and power to work this astonishing miracle.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus, as true God, has that power over life and death that belongs only to God. Last week we heard how he restored the sight of a man blind from birth. As the tension mounts among the enemies of Jesus, he does something even greater, and raises Lazarus from the dead. Jesus sums up this aspect of his identity in the saying: “I am the resurrection and the life.” This saying has given countless Christians hope and comfort when confronted by the death of a loved one, or their own death.

However, the raising of Lazarus is only a temporary sign of Christ's power. Lazarus will die again, like us, to await the final resurrection. Like Lazarus, we will receive our bodies again, but bodies that are no longer subject to death and corruption. As Paul reminds the Romans, we will rise with our glorified bodies, the glory that comes from having died and risen with Christ. The reality of our physical resurrection is shown in the first reading, where God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel.

The Gospel shows us another very important aspect of Jesus' identity. He is genuinely sad and distressed, both at the death of Lazarus and at the grief of Martha and Mary. John tells us that Jesus loved them. When he sees their grief, he weeps too. This is one of only two mentions of Jesus weeping in the Gospels. As well as being fully divine, Jesus is fully human. If anything, Jesus sees more clearly and feels more keenly the evil of death; and here is death at work among his friends.

Jesus, we might say, is weeping for us also. Lazarus stands for all fallen humanity, subject to death and sin. Jesus' tears are also prayers, as he prepares to offer himself up as our ransom: to save us from those very powers of sin and death.

Application

Perhaps St Augustine best summed up the Christian response to the tears of Christ. He wrote that if Christ wept for us, we ought to weep for ourselves. Jesus wept to teach us to weep. We remember too that in the Beatitudes Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn; for they shall be comforted." Perhaps we could learn to weep for our own failings, and also for the way in which sin is still active in the world; but not by weeping in a morbid or self-pitying way. Weeping, by its nature, has a cleansing effect. If we take our failings to the sacrament of reconciliation, we can be spiritually cleansed and strengthened. Our tears will not be in vain. They will be joined to those of Jesus, and will be given a redemptive power.

Lent is a good time for renewing our sorrow for sin. Like Lazarus being loosed from his grave clothes, we are loosed from the bonds of sin. In this way we are united more closely to Jesus, his sacred humanity and divinity, as we draw nearer to the time of joy at Easter.