

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 9, 2008

Gospel

John 11:1 - 45

There was a man named Lazarus who lived in the village of Bethany with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and he was ill. – It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. The sisters sent this message to Jesus, ‘Lord, the man you love is ill’. On receiving the message, Jesus said, ‘This sickness will end not in death but in God’s glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified’.

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea’. The disciples said, ‘Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews wanted to stone you; are you going back again?’ Jesus replied:

‘Are there not twelve hours in the day?
A man can walk in the daytime without stumbling
because he has the light of this world to see by;
but if he walks at night he stumbles,
because there is no light to guide him.’

He said that and then added, ‘Our friend Lazarus is resting, I am going to wake him’. The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he is able to rest he is sure to get better’. The phrase Jesus used referred to the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by ‘rest’ he meant ‘sleep’, so Jesus put it plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.’ Then Thomas – known as the Twin – said to the other disciples, ‘Let us go too, and die with him’.

On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to sympathize with them over their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus had come she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, ‘If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you’. ‘Your brother’ said Jesus to her ‘will rise again.’ Martha said, ‘I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day’. Jesus said:

‘I am the resurrection.
If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live,
and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?’

‘Yes, Lord,’ she said ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.’

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, ‘The Master is here and wants to see you’. Hearing this, Mary got up quickly and went to him. Jesus had not yet come into the village; he was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were in the house sympathizing with Mary saw her get up so quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who followed her, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see'. Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!' But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?' Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. Jesus said, 'Take the stone away'. Martha said to him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day'. Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: 'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I knew indeed that you always hear me, but I speak for the sake of all these who stand round me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me.'

When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free'.

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him.

Homily: In God's Own Time

If ever there was a civilization that had little to no tolerance for waiting, it is ours. And as a consequence, we tend to overlook the importance of any given moment in anticipation of the next one.

As tiny children, one of the first things we had to learn was that sometimes we had to wait for a bottle, for cuddles and hugs, for a diaper change, for the next spoonful of baby food. We became incredibly frustrated when our demands weren't met **RIGHT NOW**, and we have all probably thrown some pretty bad tantrums back in the day.

As we matured, we learned to wait in line, to say please and thank you, to sit more or less quietly in church, and to wait for the prayer before we ate our meals. We might raise our hands in school until the blood left our arms while we waited to be called on when we knew the answer to a teacher's question, but we recognized that it was expected of us to learn patience and to wait our turn, whether we wanted to or not.

We still had problems with waiting, like on Christmas Eve, or for that last day of school, but we learned that that shiny, present-filled morning would come, or that warm summer day when we said so long—for a time—to homework and tests and hello to unstructured days of fun and friends.

I would like to say that as we became adults we took the lessons of waiting with us. Unfortunately, nearly everything that confronts us from day to day has to do with deadlines imposed upon us or that we impose upon ourselves. Microwave ovens, ten-minute oil changes, overnight mail deliveries, restaurant “drive-thrus”, checkout express lines (that aren’t)—all these things and so many more reflect our desire to rush things and get on to the next task.

We chafe and mutter at traffic lights that are slow to change. We do the same thing when a person has twenty-two items in the checkout line that says twenty items or less. We become impatient sometimes when an elderly person has trouble counting out change or launches into a story that lasts far longer than we mentally allotted time to listen to them.

Television has had an enormous influence on our expectations. News commentators interrupt those whom they are interviewing often before the guests are able to give adequate answers or explanations. The news networks strive to provide information as to which candidate is winning state primaries when the polling places have been closed for barely an hour.

Our society screams, we want it all, and we want it now.

Christmas is barely over when Valentine candies and decorations are stocked in stores. Spring fashions are put out long before the weather permits the wearing of this light, bright apparel.

And when things do not happen according to plan, when we cannot take that trip, or illness forces us to miss work or church, or when our

efforts do not come to fruition in our time, we are frustrated in much the same way that we were as very small children, and we say, “Why?”

Martha and Mary of Bethany had seen the miracles of Jesus. So when they sent a servant to tell Jesus that their brother Lazarus was gravely ill, they expected him to rush right over to their house and heal him. Their concern was clearly for the life of their dear brother, and they didn't understand when Jesus did not set out for Bethany immediately after hearing the news.

The disciples had another concern. They were afraid that those Jews who were out to get Jesus would use the opportunity to capture him and kill him.

Jesus had waited for a reason to see his friends in Bethany. That reason was clear only to him. As a result of raising Lazarus from the dead, many people would believe in him for salvation. Yet at that, he did know that his waiting to go meant great grief for Martha and Mary, and even for him, for he was touched by their grief. And while some people in the crowd of mourners said, “Why? Why couldn't he have come sooner and saved this man the way he caused the blind man to see,” God had waited for them a great revelation of his power that was to bring them a joy far greater than the grief they were experiencing.

Sometimes I wonder why we don't have more people here to worship with us. We have all mentioned to friends and relatives the opportunity that our Catholicism provides for worship and receiving the Sacraments, regardless of their living situation or sexual orientation or anything else that might prevent them from being welcome in a traditional Roman Catholic or Orthodox congregation. Our welcoming faith is something that spoke to me the first time I was exposed to it. I believe that Jesus would welcome people the way we welcome them here, and that many of the human rules that would exclude some are not what Jesus intended for his Church. Salvation is a gift that is freely given to all who desire it. This is Christ's teaching.

But perhaps it just isn't God's time yet. Perhaps the slender plant that is our congregation needs more watering and prayer, and perhaps we need to mature and come into our own with like-minded people from our former organization before the Lord is ready to use us. If that is the case, then to try to force something to come to pass before its time would not only be wrong; it would be literally counterproductive.

So it remains, at least for me, to exercise some patience and maturity, but to also prepare for that time when the Lord is ready to use us. I want to be receptive and well-prepared for that time when it comes. As with the spring, the time will come when it is supposed to come, not when I want it to come. And when it is God's own good time, nothing will stop it.
