

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
April 10, 2011  
10 AM Liturgy**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**Today's homily is a commentary on what has been called by many the shortest sentence in the Bible. Certainly in the original King James Version of the New Testament it can claim that honor. "Jesus wept."**

**Now don't get your hopes up. Just because my topic today is the shortest sentence in the New Testament does not automatically mean that this will be the shortest homily heard today at St. Ignatius Church!**

**John's gospel is said to present seven great signs performed by Jesus in order to draw his disciples ever more closely into deeper faith in him. It all begins at a wedding feast in Cana. We have seen two of the great signs on the previous two Sundays: the story of the woman at the well and the healing of the man born blind. As scripture scholar John Donahue, S.J. comments: "The raising of Lazarus is the final and greatest sign of Jesus, a symbolic narrative of his victory over death at the very end of his own life" (*America*, 2002). But in John's hands, miracle stories are never simple.**

**John's narrative here, like so often elsewhere, is a complex, multi-layered, masterpiece of hidden meaning. On one level, the most**

obvious, this is a story of a family Jesus loved, and a friend whom he brings back to life. On another level it offers a surprising glimpse into Jesus' own psyche—that is, by the way, the actual word John uses in this passage: *psuché*.

Why is the image of Jesus surprising here? Because this is John the Evangelist speaking. This Evangelist is the one who portrays Jesus from the beginning of his gospel as the divine Word through whom all things were made, the first-born of all creation. It is the same John who portrays Jesus throughout his entire passion as being the one in charge of all the proceedings (The Good Friday Passion account). Jesus, for John, freely “lays down his life”—Pilate or the Jewish authorities do not take it from him. John's Jesus is a king stretched out on his throne as *he* gives his life back to *Abba*.

And yet here, in the story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus' conflicted, strong, human emotions reign. Nowhere else in the gospels do we hear so directly and so often of Jesus' love for friends. Nowhere else does Jesus' emotion appear so clearly “on his sleeve,” except for once, maybe, in the Temple. Here he is “deeply troubled,” “greatly disturbed,” and weeps. Even John seems to be having trouble holding on to a consistent image of Jesus: eternal Word though he is, his humanity breaks through and shatters any divine superiority that could put him above the human fray. Jesus loves this man with a fully human, passionate love; and he is dead!

**Father Donahue again: “No other passage in the New testament speaks so often of Jesus’ love—and of his subsequent grief.” And in very strong language John tries to express Jesus’ anger at death’s power and sorrow over its ravages. Why do we often not sense the strength and power of John’s language? Why do so many see Jesus here as being just compassionate rather than angry, being kind to a friend rather than hurt and gravely distressed?**

**It will come as no surprise to some of you who know the complexity of John’s language and images, to hear that there may be some translation problems here.**

**English translations, particularly, have presented some issues over the centuries. The Greek words John uses here, the ones that we translate as “deeply moved” and “perturbed,” allow Jesus to sound terribly compassionate toward his friends. But they are much softer words in English than what the Greek actually conveys. The Greek words denote anger and indignation, and they also connote an intensity of those feelings. (For you Greek lovers—and you know who you are—the words used are *enebrimesato* and *entaraxen*.)**

**Scholars suggest that the translators actually interpreted rather than translated these words precisely in order to convey compassion more than**

what the words in Greek really meant at that time, fear and anger. Those emotions seemed too harsh in translation—especially in John’s account. But in John’s Greek, Jesus is intensely angry in this scene. He is devastated by this death.

It is also interesting to note that John uses two completely different words to describe the people crying in this scene. Everyone else who is crying, including Lazarus’ sisters, is described by the word that suggests “ritual wailing” (*klaio*). So-called ritual wailing was, and still is, common in many near-Eastern cultures. Jesus, on the other hand, is described using a word appearing nowhere else in the New Testament (*dakruo*). It is a word that is deeply intentional, deeply personal and painful. Jesus’ tears are of anger and frustration and profound hurt.

What’s going on here for John the Evangelist? (He is always very deliberate in his vocabulary.) John is saying that at the doors of death, which have robbed Jesus of his good friend, Jesus confronts his own immanent death only days away in John’s narrative. That timing is the key to this passage.

Jesus may know and believe deep in his heart that eternal life will conquer death. But he also knows it will not abolish death. So as Sandra Schneider’s put it: “We are not asked not to weep [at death], but only not to despair, for the one in whom we believe is our resurrection, because he is our

**life.”**

**As Jesus faces his own death, there is no superman here. No Gnostic “spiritual” retreat. No Docetist heretical theologies. He does not “seem” to hurt, “seem” to know his own fate. Jesus knows what lies ahead and he embraces the fear, the terror, the anger he feels in the face of death. And even as he knows he will call Lazarus out of his bondage, in the shortest sentence in the bible, Jesus weeps. We, too, get closer to *his* fully human passion. It begins next week right here.**