

Fifth Sunday in Lent 2008**Ezekiel 37:12–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8–11; John 11:1–45****Jesus wept****David Hollenbach, S.J.**

As Holy Week approaches, today's gospel narrative of the raising of Lazarus is the final and greatest symbol of Jesus' public life: the promise of eternal life. The narrative comes in John's gospel between Jesus' description of the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and the decision of Jewish leaders that Jesus "must die for the people." This context invites us to reflect on our experience of suffering, loss, and death even as we hear the promise of the fullness of life.

Mary and Martha are very close friends of Jesus. They have just lost their brother Lazarus, who was also very close to Jesus. When Jesus finally comes to visit them, they ask a question that many of us have asked when we have faced loss. Their question in the face of death is so human that John's gospel repeats it three times in our reading. "Lord," Martha cried, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary her sister said the exact same thing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Amidst all the grief and tears, the neighbors mumbled their own aside: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Could he not have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache? Since Jesus claims to be so close to God, couldn't he have saved his friends from facing this tragedy in the first place?

Jesus didn't answer their question. Instead, in the shortest verse in the entire Bible, He revealed one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God: "Jesus wept." When Jesus experienced the sisters Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus, and their distraught neighbors, John writes that he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" and enters into their sadness and shares it. The physician Eric Cassell, who has written extensively on caring for the terminally ill, once observed that "to be whole as a person is to be whole amongst others." When illness shatters our sense of wholeness, that wholeness can be repaired only inside human relationship. Jesus begins the process of restoring Lazarus to life and overcoming the sadness of the two sisters by sharing their suffering

Jesus' closeness to God does not make him remote and aloof. The God who is present in Jesus is not somewhere way out there. No, the God present in Jesus is a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our human well-being. Indeed, the God present in Jesus is so close to us in our suffering and struggles that the passage in John's gospel that follows today's reading tells us that Jesus will himself soon die. When the religious leaders learned of Lazarus's miraculous restoration they became afraid that all the people would come to believe in him and the Romans come and take away both their land

and nation. So they decided they had to get rid of Jesus. John tells us that from the day Lazarus was raised they planned to kill him.

The fact that God is compassionate and shares our struggles and losses is condensed into the two words in today's gospel: Jesus wept. God's compassionate sharing in our suffering and even death is enacted in events of Holy Week that we will be commemorating starting next Sunday. God's compassion toward the sisters Martha and Mary is the reason why the Scriptures encourage us to bring to Him every anguish, confusion, anger, and anxiety we feel and to truly share it with him. Like Mary, Martha, and their neighbors, when we experience loss and suffering we are invited to approach God with words like those in the Psalm for this week:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

We can pray to God like this because God weeps when we weep. We place our hope in Him because Jesus has shown us what great love looks like. Jesus' great love restores life to a beloved friend at the cost of his own life. Jesus is a model of the great lover who lays down his life for his friend, a drama that will be played out between now and Easter. This is what Jesus has done for us too, so we can trust in God even when we face great loss. Then, above all, God is with us.

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