

Meditations: Sunday of the Fifth Week of Lent (Year A)

Some reflections that can guide our prayer as we enter the final week of Lent.

- Jesus waits for Lazarus's death
- Our Lord "frees" Martha from the tomb
- Lazarus's resurrection: embracing the life Christ offers

JESUS KNOWS his hour is approaching. He has already announced this on several occasions to his disciples (cf. *Jn* 8:20; 13:33-38). Despite these warnings, Jesus realizes it will be hard for them to

understand what is about to happen. So, to strengthen the apostles' faith, when news of the illness of his friend Lazarus arrives, He decides to wait. And He gives a reason for this which, at first glance, is not obvious: *This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it (Jn 11:4).*

Our Lord is not insensitive to the suffering of Lazarus, nor to that of his sisters. On the contrary, we see Him crying at the tomb of his friend after Martha and Mary open their hearts and share their sorrow and pain with Him. *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (Jn 11:21)*, Martha exclaims. We can intuit that Christ did not come immediately upon receiving the news because He wanted to give a new dimension to their suffering. Martha knew that Lazarus would be restored to life *in the resurrection on*

the last day (Jn 11:24). But she didn't expect to enjoy her brother's company again in this life.

"Jesus could have avoided the death of his friend Lazarus, but he wanted to share in our suffering for the death of people dear to us, and above all, he wanted to show God's dominion over death. In this Gospel passage we see that the faith of man and the omnipotence of God, of God's love, seek each other and finally meet."^[1] By waiting, Jesus responds to his friends' deepest sorrow. He will not only bring Lazarus back to life. He will show that He always has the last word. Those who put their hope in our Lord have nothing to fear, for He is *the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25).* "Nothing need disturb us," Saint Josemaría said, "if we make up our minds to anchor our hearts in a real longing for our true fatherland. Our Lord will lead us there with his grace, and he will send

a good wind to carry our ship to the bright shores of our destination.”^[2]

WE CAN IMAGINE the sadness in the home at Bethany when Lazarus died. The home that so often had been filled with joy is now weighed down with sorrow. Martha and Mary would have helped each other to bear their suffering, now deepened by Jesus’ absence. For not only might He have healed Lazarus, but simply having Him nearby would have been a great consolation. *So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him (Jn 11:20).* Martha’s sadness did not lead her to withdraw into herself, to dwell on events that she couldn’t understand and that filled her with sadness. Martha simply wanted to tell Christ the reason for her sorrow: *If you had been here... (Jn 11:21).* We are

reminded of the psalmist's lament:
*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears
be attentive to the voice of my pleas
for mercy! (Ps 130:1-2).*

On arriving in Bethany, the first “miracle” Jesus works is, in a certain sense, helping Martha escape from the “tomb” her thoughts have trapped her in. He doesn’t reproach her for a single tear she has shed over her brother’s death. In that moment of deep sorrow, Jesus wants to strengthen her hope. *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? (Jn 11:25-26).* And Martha, despite her great sorrow and confusion, answers: *Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. (Jn 11:27).* In the midst of her weeping, Martha continues to have

faith. Regardless of her brother now being dead, she believes that whoever is with Christ will not die. Her sadness over Lazarus's death and her lack of understanding over why her Friend hadn't come sooner doesn't prevent Martha from recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who gives meaning to her own life.

Saint Josemaría, who often experienced a sorrow similar to Martha's, wrote: "In my wretchedness I complained to a friend of mine, saying that it seemed as if Jesus were passing me by... and leaving me on my own. But immediately I thought better of it and was sorry. Full of confidence, I said: It is not true, my Love. Quite clearly it is I who have gone away from you. Never again!"^[3] —

WHEN JESUS arrived at the tomb, He asked those present to remove the stone. But Martha protested: *by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days (Jn 11:39)*. Our Lord reminds her of his recent conversation with her: *Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? (Jn 11:40)*. Then they removed the stone and Jesus, after addressing his Father, *cried out with a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth (Jn 11:43-44)*.

Christ refuses to accept the tombs we have sometimes built for ourselves, with our mistakes and confusions. He invites us to come out of the tomb, like Lazarus, and embrace the life He is offering us. "He invites us, almost orders us, to come out of the tomb in which our sins have buried us. He calls us insistently to come out

of the darkness of that prison in which we are enclosed, content with a false, selfish and mediocre life.”^[4] But He also counts on our freedom to accept this call or not. Jesus does not force us to get up. He holds out his hand to us and waits for us to take it. “Lazarus rose because he heard the voice of God and immediately wanted to get out of the situation he was in. If he hadn’t wanted to move, he would have died again. A sincere resolution: to always have faith in God; to always hope in God; to always love God... who never abandons us.”^[5]

The evangelist concludes this scene by telling us that many Jews, when they saw what Jesus did, *believed in him* (Jn 11:45). Now the apostles and the two sisters finally understand why our Lord did not come earlier. Not only has their faith and hope in Him been strengthened, but also many other people have begun to

believe in Him. From then on, the family in Bethany will give witness to the life Jesus offers to those who believe in Him. That is what our Lady did. We can ask Mary to help us share with others the joy of letting Christ's light enter into our hearts, and free us from the tombs we can create for ourselves

^[1] Francis, Angelus, 29 March 2020.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 221.

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 159.

^[4] Francis, Angelus, 6 April 2014.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 211.

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