

THE EMMAUS SERIES

5th Sunday of Lent, Year A

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

I am the resurrection and the life

Our Lenten journey is drawing to a close; today's readings remind us of what lies ahead, with Ezekiel's vision of new life for a valley of bones and Paul's promise that the Spirit that will 'give life to our mortal bodies'. The gospel reading from John tells the story of the raising of Lazarus. This sequence - carefully crafted as a prelude to the passion narrative - prepares us for what is to come; Jesus confronts death itself and emerges victorious.

As the narrative opens, the Lord's coming death is called to mind, Mary the sister of Lazarus is identified as the one who, at this time, 'anooints the Lord with ointment' - for 'the day of his burial' (cf. Jn 12:7). The illness of Lazarus 'will not end in death, but in God's glory' and the glory of the Son of God. The death of Jesus, if he 'goes to Judaea' is a real and terrifying prospect for his disciples - leading Thomas to exclaim, 'Let us go too, and die with him'. The narrative highlights the 'friendship' of Jesus with the family of Bethany: soon to be caught up in the drama of the Saviour's rejection by the nation's leaders. Such a detail, we know, has significance in the meditative style of John's gospel. 'I call you friends, not servants' (Jn 15:15), Jesus will tell his disciples. And the repeated reference to 'the beloved disciple' in the narrative that follows brings out in graphic detail the implications of these words - an encouragement for all who follow the way of discipleship.

We are left in no doubt that Jesus triumphs over death in all its horror. The mortal remains of Lazarus have been in the tomb for 'four days': 'He will smell', his sister warns. Numerous mourners have now assembled, not all of them well disposed towards Jesus - an intimation of what is soon to follow. 'Could he not have prevented this man's death', some of them ask.

This confrontation with death, Jesus makes clear, is a sign. As he sets out for Bethany, after the death of Lazarus, he declares, 'I am glad for your sake, because now you will believe'. And although he knows that the Father 'always hears him', he addresses the Father publicly, 'for the sake of those who stand around, so that they may believe that it was you who sent me' - the claim of his divine mission that is many times repeated in the course of John's gospel.

In the exchanges that take place between Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus, he leads them towards the fullness of faith that will unite them with him in his final victory over death - his Paschal Mystery. Like his other disciples, Martha has already found faith in Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world'; now she is led to recognise the full implications of this coming, as she affirms her faith in the truth of Jesus' words, 'I AM the resurrection and the life' – the very source of 'eternal life'.

'Lazarus, here! Come out': the victory is complete and absolute. 'Unbind him, let him go free': words of promise for all who will believe in his coming triumph.

John Thornhill sm