

Passion Sunday 2017 John 11: 1-45

The biblical narrative of the Raising of Lazarus is found in today's gospel. Lazarus is introduced as a follower of Jesus, who lives in the town of Bethany near Jerusalem. He is identified as the brother of the sisters Mary and Martha. The sisters send word to Jesus that Lazarus, is ill. Instead of immediately traveling to Bethany, according to the narrator, Jesus intentionally remains where he is for two more days before beginning the journey.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he finds that Lazarus is dead and has already been in his tomb for four days. He meets first with Martha and Mary in turn. Martha laments that Jesus did not arrive soon enough to heal her brother and Jesus replies with the well-known statement, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die". Later the narrator here gives the famous simple phrase, "Jesus wept".

In the presence of a crowd of Jewish mourners, Jesus comes to the tomb. Over the objections of Martha, Jesus has them roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb and says a prayer. He then calls Lazarus to come out and Lazarus does so, still wrapped in his grave-cloths. Jesus then calls for someone to remove the grave-cloths, and let him go.

The narrative ends with the statement that many of the witnesses to this event "believed in him." Others are said to report the events to the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

The Gospel of John mentions Lazarus again in chapter 12. Six days before the Passover on which Jesus is crucified, Jesus returns to Bethany and Lazarus attends a supper that Martha, his sister, serves. Jesus and Lazarus together attract the attention of many Jews and the narrator states that the chief priests consider having Lazarus put to death because so many people are believing in Jesus on account of this miracle. The miracle of the raising of Lazarus, the longest coherent narrative in John aside from the Passion, is the climax of John's

"signs". It explains the crowds seeking Jesus on Palm Sunday, and leads directly to the decision of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus.

Jesus and His disciples arrived at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha about mealtime. It was Martha who invited them in. Nothing is said in the Bible account about the cordial greetings they exchanged, but an important lesson was recorded during that visit that should positively affect us.

The Gospels record that Jesus felt comfortable in the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. The four were not just acquaintances; they were close friends.

Earlier, when Jesus had come to resurrect Lazarus from the dead, He showed great respect and love for Mary and Martha. They spoke to Jesus as if He were a part of their immediate family. Jesus was so troubled by their anguish over their brother's death that He was moved to tears before raising Lazarus to life again.

When we visit friends and relatives we have a good idea of how they think and act. Jesus was no different. He appreciated the differences among His three friends and felt comfortable enough to offer constructive advice as to their priorities.

Martha's outlook on life was quite different from Mary's. It is possible that Martha was older and that her age figured into her personality and perspective. Martha's words and actions depict her as practical and efficient. Nothing is wrong with being practical and efficient if it doesn't interfere with the more important things in life. Martha appears to be the leader and the more hospitable and social of the two.

"And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word". If one were to read no further, one could assume Mary may have been a little lazy, leaving the needs of hospitality and hostess to her gregarious sister. It was Martha who invited Jesus into their home. It was Mary who simply sat at Jesus' feet, listening to Him talk. Who was the more hospitable, the more sociable? Who was more concerned about serving her Saviour, Martha or Mary? This attitude, outlook and perspective is the kind of approach God desires in all His disciples. Jesus highly regarded Mary's approach.

Maybe Mary was shy. But we should consider Jesus' evaluation of Mary's actions. "But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.' And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her'".

John emphasizes here that Mary was so humble, convicted and dedicated to Jesus and His teachings that no expense or personal act was too great or demanding for her to honor her Savior. This attitude, outlook and perspective is the kind of approach God desires in all His disciples. Jesus highly regarded Mary's approach.

Jesus responded forthrightly but tenderly: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things". Martha was fretting over something quite important to her: providing a meal for Jesus and His disciples. But how important was this compared with other priorities? Mary and Martha were Jesus' good friends. Martha stayed busy supplying her guests with things that made their visit more comfortable. She should be commended for seeing to the important needs of others.

But Jesus commended her sister Mary. Jesus noted, in effect, that Martha stayed busy with the things of this world, but that Mary concentrated on the more heavenly. He commended Mary for choosing the good part, the holy words, truth and faith of Jesus Christ, which will never be taken from her. We should follow Mary's example and desire God's truth above everything else.

Jesus says, "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." One of the early church fathers named Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a person fully alive." Paul said, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Perhaps this prayer sums it all up and makes it clearer to us;

"Almighty God, our heavenly Father, whose Son blessed by his Presence the home of Lazarus and Mary and Martha in Bethany: grant that, like Martha, we may serve Christ faithfully in the person of our brothers and sisters; and that, like Mary, we may feed on his Word and grow in his love and grace; and that,

like Lazarus, we may be brought forth from death to new life in him; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” Amen.