

Lectio Divina – 5th Sunday of Lent - Year A

Contexts

John's Gospel (in brief)

- **Structure of John's Gospel**

1:1-18: Prologue – An introduction to and summary of the career of the incarnate Word.

1:19-12:50: Part One: The Book of Signs: the Word reveals himself to the world and to his own, but they do not accept him.

Chapter 6 – Jesus, the Bread of Life is right in the middle of The Book of Signs – a central text in more ways than one!

13:1-20:31: Part Two: The Book of Glory: To those who accept him, the Word shows his glory by returning to the Father in death, resurrection and ascension. Fully glorified, he communicates the Spirit of life.

21:1-25: Epilogue: Galilean resurrection appearances and second conclusion.

- It is the only Gospel to call Jesus "God".
- Purpose of Gospel is so that those who follow Jesus might have the kind of faith that would give them eternal life, namely, the faith that Jesus was God's only Son, possessing God's own life and had come into the world from above that people might be given that life (and thus be begotten by God) and become God's children. (Raymond Brown SS)
- Jesus is 'The Bread of Life' who feeds, nourishes and sustains the children of God.

John 11:1-45: (short form) things to notice

- This episode comes from the Book of Signs in which Jesus is portrayed as revealing himself to the world and experiencing rejection and hostility or false-adulation. John deliberately calls various miracles of Jesus 'signs' so that his audience can see the deeper reality behind the works that Jesus does. Remember that John has very carefully created these stories to communicate the truth about Jesus. Each of the characters (as in last week's Gospel) has a part to play in the unfolding drama of John's story.
- Just as the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman portrays Jesus as 'living water' and the healing of the man born blind (last week) portrays Jesus as 'the light of the world', so the raising of Lazarus portrays Jesus as 'the life of the world'.
- This is the last 'sign' in John's Book of Signs and points to Jesus' own passion, death and resurrection.
- John's story begins with the naming of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary and the place where they live (Bethany).
- Jesus receives a message from the sisters that Lazarus is sick. Notice that Lazarus is identified as 'the man you love'. Lazarus may be a symbol for the whole believing community in this story, especially in the light of "I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (vs 25)
- Similar to the story about the blind man the death Lazarus provides another opportunity for 'God's glory to be seen'.
- Then follows a statement about Jesus love for Martha, Mary & Lazarus. Again, they could be a symbol for the Christian community whom Jesus loves. I think it also means that everything in this story is happening in the context of loving relationships.
- John has Jesus delay in going to see Lazarus to make the point that Lazarus has been dead for four days by the time Jesus arrives – not just in some kind of coma.

- Jesus (and the disciples) arrive and are met by Martha who voices the expectation of the others (disciples & crowd) who have gathered: 'If you had been here...' – as someone well-known for his miracles should have been able to heal Lazarus. Martha then makes a statement of faith, 'but, I know that even now whatever you ask of God he will grant you.'
- 'Your brother will rise again' – Martha's response indicates that the expectation of resurrection is obviously well-established in John's community.
- 'I am the resurrection and the life...' Note the emphasis in these sentences on both *resurrection* and *life*, both the *living* and the *dead*. This is the heart of the story (despite the actual raising of Lazarus).
- Martha makes her confession of faith, 'Yes, Lord, I believe...'
- Jesus mourns and weeps at the death of his friend. Unfortunately, the short version omits this very human image of Jesus weeping for his friend. Nevertheless, it does include Jesus being in great distress and speaking 'with a sigh which came straight from the heart'. The crowd notices Jesus' grief and says, 'See how much he loved him!'
- Some said, however, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death, too?'
- Still sighing Jesus reaches the tomb and asks for the stone to be taken away. Martha comments that by now Lazarus will smell. This is probably included to underline the point that Lazarus has truly died – not just in some kind of coma. In contemporary Rabbinical thought in Jesus' day, sufficient time has now elapsed for the soul to have left the body and decomposition to have begun.
- Jesus reassured Martha, 'Have I not told you....?'
- The stone is moved and Jesus prays that those around him might come to believe. The prayer is an expression of Jesus' relationship with God and a call to faith (belief) in Jesus.
- Jesus calls out to Lazarus and Lazarus comes out still bound with the traditional burial cloths. Jesus commands them to release Lazarus: 'Unbind him, let him go free.'
- Many of those present come to belief in Jesus – so the story is more about believing in Jesus than it is about Jesus raising a man from the dead.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The Sunday Lenten Gospels

	First Reading	Second Reading	Gospel
1 st Sunday	Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7 Creation & Fall	Romans 5:12-19 Sin and Grace	Mt 4:1-11 Temptations
2 nd Sunday	Genesis 12:1-4 The call of Abraham	2 Timothy 1:8-10 Our call to holiness	Mt 17:1-9 Transfiguration
3 rd Sunday	Exodus 17:3-7 Israel's water of despair	Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 God's love poured into us	John 4:5-42 Samaritan Woman [Living Water]
4 th Sunday	1 Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13 Anointing of David	Ephesians 5:8-14 Children of the Light	John 9:1-41 Man born blind [from darkness to Light]
5th Sunday	Ezekiel 37:12-14 I will put my spirit in you	Romans 8:8-11 The Spirit dwells in you	John 11:1-45 Raising of Lazarus [from death to Life]

Passion	Isaiah 50:4-7 I did not cover my face against insult	Philippians 2:6-11 He humbled himself and God raised him up	Matthew 26:14-27:66 Passion
Easter	Acts 10:34, 37-43 We ate and drank with him	Colossians 3:1-4 Look for the things that are above	John 20:1-9 Jesus risen from the dead

The Great Gospels of Lent

The three great dramas from John's Gospel help us understand that the Christian journey from temptation to transfiguration occurs only in and through Jesus who is living water for the deepest thirst of our human hearts; who draws us out of darkness and into light; who is life itself for those who believe.

"Just as we accompanied the Samaritan woman last week on her journey of faith, so now we are invited to walk with the blind man as he gains not only his physical sight, but the in-sight of faith. By contrast, those who claim to have spiritual sight – the religious authorities – are exposed as being truly blind.

Like the Samaritan woman, the blind man progresses in his discovery of who Jesus is. At first Jesus is simply "a man", then "a prophet", then "Son of Man" and finally "Lord". He also becomes progressively more bold and courageous in his testimony before the authorities. In contrast, they become increasingly blind to the truth." (BOTW)

This Sunday we accompany Mary and Martha and the crowd in delving into the most confronting journey of all: death. Typically of John, the story is not just about raising one man from the dead, but about who Jesus is and what belief in him is all about.

Reflection

The final of the three Great Gospels of Lent is ours today - a Gospel story of life and freedom. Like the gospels of the last two Sundays, the dramatic story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead is a story of faith and belief.

There are three different groups of believers in the story: those who believe that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' death (Jesus is already known to be a healer); those who came to believe in him because they see Lazarus rise, and those, like Martha, who believe in Jesus even though Lazarus died.

In this Gospel Jesus proclaims himself 'the resurrection and the life'. We see him deeply moved by the death of his friend. We find him in earnest prayer with God. We see him full of strength as he commands Lazarus to come out.

One thing that is rarely commented on about this story is the image of love that pervades it. Jesus has treated the Samaritan woman with dignity, respect, gentleness and love, and reached out in love to heal the blind man without being asked. In this story his love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus and the grief he feels because of that love are very clearly seen.

For me, it brings together once again the connection between faith and love. If John intended this story to reassure his community (those who have faith in Jesus) then he makes clear that they are also loved by Jesus, and suggests in a certain manner Jesus, too, weeps when harm (illness and death) come to his friends (believers). The ultimate reassurance is that this loving, faith-filled relationship we have with Jesus not only sustains us in life but also sees us through the dark moments of suffering and death – ultimately to life beyond the restrictions (binding cloths) we find in this world. Finally, we will be free.

To me, the most powerful words in the Gospel are: *Unbind him, let him go free.*

Freedom is one of the deepest aspirations of the human heart. We long to be free – from illness, worry, fear, (especially at the moment) the expectations of others, guilt, our faults and so on. The ultimate freedom is freedom from eternal death.

We know we can be physically alive and spiritually dead through envy, greed, fear, hatred. We know we can bring death to others through lies, gossip, meanness, cruelty, withholding forgiveness and so on.

By living the life of Christ we bring life, love and freedom to ourselves and each other. The choice to remain in death or to rise with Christ is ours to make.