

## 5th Sunday of Lent A SFX 2023 Lazarus

When Jesus arrives at the house, Martha says to him: *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Next when Mary meets Jesus, she says the same thing which is basically the question "Where were you when we needed you." Martha and Mary are voicing for us all that timeless, universal question when confronted with human suffering, "Where are you God?" "Why do you stay silent when innocent people suffer?" "Why do we have to endure such pain in bereavement and loss."

The Psalmist asks that question many times: *"My tears have become my bread, night, by day, as I heard it said all day long, 'Where is your God?'"* (Psalm 41). It's a question that gave us the book of Job. His friends, his so-called comforters, asked him what he had done wrong that God had abandoned him. But Job was an innocent man who came to know the testing and trials of life that few people avoid.

On Friday I shared the tears of three families. Three children who had lost an elderly mother; a man who had lost his partner, the love of his life his soulmate; and a young mother in tears at the circumstances of her life. I am afraid folks, there are no easy answers to the problem of suffering. There is no creed or philosophy that can give an adequate explanation, and even for the atheists a world without God is not a world without evil or suffering.

When face to face with someone, there are no ready words we can give to someone experiencing suffering and loss. But our Gospel today hints at something of an understanding, the beginnings of a response.

Jesus does not offer a theory. He goes to the tomb. He goes to the place of their loss. He enters into their helplessness and pain and he weeps. "Jesus wept." Remember those words, John 11:35. The shortest verse in the Bible. "Jesus wept." It follows his distress and a sigh that goes straight to the heart. But it is not just an expression of sorrow at the loss of his friend Lazarus. It is a statement that goes to the heart of our faith, that God has entered this world in the person of Jesus and shared our suffering, embraced our tears. He knows what hurts. He plunged into the thick of a human struggle. That is what will be marking in holy week. It's why we will make that journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Jesus entered into the extremes of our existence, he not only died a death, but entered into a hell of Holy Saturday with his descent to the realms of the dead. As Henry Nouwen wrote:

*"To us who cry from the depths of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, an arm that will embrace us, a word that speaks to us here and now, and a heart that is not afraid of our fears and tremblings; to us, who feel our own pain as no other human being feels it, has felt it, or will ever feel it, and are always waiting for someone who dares to come close - to us has come a man who can truly say, 'I am with you.' Jesus Christ is God with us and our every human pain reverberates in his innermost self. (Henri Nouwen, Compassion p.24)*

Jesus wept not only for Lazarus, but for the city of Jerusalem. Visitors to the Mount of Olives will find a church built in the form of a teardrop. Tears for pain of human history: the victims of war and injustice, the impoverished, the helpless and the marginalised

The case of Lazarus being the exception, Jesus does not come to fish us out of a world of suffering, he shows us that there is redemption through pain and suffering. Perhaps the only answer to the question of suffering and evil is the one Jesus gave to Mary and Martha – shared helplessness, shared distress, and shared tears, with no attempt to try to explain God’s seeming absence, but rather a trust that, because God, who we believe to be good, and whose essence is love will in the end make everything well, and our pain will someday be redeemed in God’s embrace.

When Jesus stands at the threshold of Lazarus’ tomb he stands before all the physical and spiritual deaths humanity can experience and cries out to those weeping with him: *“Unbind him and let him go free.”*

Christianity is not a spectator-sport. We are not to be bystanders, but we are called to participate in the Lord’s saving work. To work with the Lord to help release people from whatever holds them down, to unbind them and set them free. To weep with someone is our first response. To listen to their hurts and to draw them into a circle of love, a healing community that can raise the dead to life again.

The French Writer Leon Bloy once said: *“Where there are tears, there is the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit of God is always, as at the beginning, ‘hovering over the waters’.”* [c.f. Genesis 1:2] And where there is the Spirit of God, there is Resurrection. As St Paul says today, *“The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us.”*

In the midst of our tears, in this vale of tears, we can repeat with Martha our faith in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life.