



5th Sunday of Lent (Year A)

Homily

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**Sunday 29 March 2020
Cathedral Presbytery Chapel**

Every time we celebrate Mass together and listen to the Gospel reading, and indeed every time we pick up the Gospels to pray, the Lord, I think, is inviting us to ask two questions.

The first is this: *who is this man Jesus, that he could say the things we hear him say or do the things we see him do in today's gospel?*

The second question, or set of questions, follows from the first: *how am I being called to respond to Jesus today? Do I recognise myself in any of the people whom Jesus encounters in today's gospel? What is God asking of me today?*

In the present difficult circumstances in which we all find ourselves these questions seem to me to be very important. Who is Jesus really? How do I find him in the midst of the concern, even fear, which is gripping so many people, including perhaps some of us? What is Jesus offering us today? What is he asking of us today?

As I read today's story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead I am struck very much by the focus on the two sisters, Mary and Martha. Mary remains in the house when Jesus eventually arrives – she is the one who on another occasion sat quietly at the Lord's feet listening to him while Martha rushed about looking after everyone's needs. On this occasion Martha comes out to meet Jesus and says to him, *"If you had been here my brother would not have died"*. Martha is a woman of faith so she goes on to say, *"I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God he will grant you."*

Perhaps Martha is struggling to hold together her faith in Jesus and her disappointment and confusion at his delay in coming to their home. Perhaps she felt that at the very time when the family really needed Jesus the most he was not there for them.

It would be understandable, I think, if many of us find ourselves feeling something the same. It is certainly the case that the whole world, of which we are a part, is in great need of God at this time. And yet God does not seem to be here for us in the ways we are used to. For us as Catholics it is through the life of the Church, and especially through the sacraments, that God comes to us



and meets us in the daily realities of our lives. God is there for us in particular in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we come face to face with God's mercy and God's compassion, through what someone recently described as "the merciful, welcoming, 'ridiculously-pardoning' church. " And, even more, God is there for us in the celebration of the Eucharist through which we are drawn into a profound communion of love with him as we receive him in Holy Communion. It is here that he shows us how to respond to his invitation to *"come to me if you labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest"*. And yet, it is precisely these two wonderful moments of deep encounter with the Lord which are at the moment either closed to us or not easy for us to have access to. We cannot gather together to celebrate the Mass because our churches are closed and nor can we come together, even in small groups, to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. The heartfelt cry of Martha *"Lord, if only you had been here"* is one that many of us are experiencing in a raw and painful way.

When Jesus heard of Lazarus's illness he waited for two days before setting out with his disciples to go to the home of this family that he loved. What almost looks like callous indifference turns out to be, instead, a part of God's mysterious plan. *"This sickness,"* said Jesus, *"will not end in death but in God's glory"*. God can turn what look like desperate and hopeless situations into something else. The terrible suffering which the Covid-19 virus is causing in people's lives – loss of life, loss of income, loss of hope – might yet be a transforming experience in the lives of many. In a world which has forgotten God a realisation might begin to dawn that life without God ultimately makes no sense at all. Our own experience of loss as we are deprived of so much which is at the heart of our Catholic faith – the Sacraments, the liturgy, the support we gain from gathering together as a community of believers, the opportunity to celebrate the beautiful liturgies of Holy Week and Easter – all this might be the sacrifice God is asking of us at this time as he seeks to lead people back to him. If so, then God is inviting us to accept this temporary loss so that in the end the glory of God- his love for humanity - might be more clearly seen and experienced. We are called, in other words, to try and see what is happening around us, and in us, with the eyes of faith: that trusting faith which takes God at his word when he says to us, *"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you by your name, you are mine"*.

None of us would pretend for a moment that any of this is easy. As Jesus once said when he was criticised because his disciples did not fast in the way that others did, *"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast."* As Catholics, for whom the Eucharist is so much at the heart of our faith and of our lives, there is a sense in which the Bridegroom has been taken away, and so we must fast. But perhaps the Lord is inviting us to turn our eyes and our hearts to all the other ways in which he is with us: in the Scriptures which we can read and meditate on at home; in the many spiritual traditions of the Church which give expression to our belief that we are never alone, that God is always with us, and that we are always accompanied on our journey by Mary and the saints; and at this time most of all, perhaps, in the faces of the lonely, the isolated, the fearful, the sick, those who are mourning the loss of loved ones, all those for whom the present situation is especially burdensome. Yes, in a sense we are deprived of the Lord in the Eucharist:



but our love for our Eucharistic Lord will now be shown, as it must always be, in our love for him present in each other, and especially in those most in need.

In the end Martha's cry from the heart – *If only you had been here, Lord, everything, would have been alright* – perhaps missed the point. Even in the darkest moments Jesus is with us. We just have to look for him, and love him, in the ways in which he chooses to come to us – which might be rather different from the ways we were expecting. The Lord has not abandoned us, the Church has not abandoned us, we will not abandon each other. And so we can pray in the words of Saint John Henry Newman:

“Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom; lead thou me on. The night is dark and I am far from home; lead though me on. Keep thou my feet. I do not ask to see the distant scene: one step enough for me.”