

# Reflection for the 5th Sunday of Lent, Cycle A

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The readings for this Sunday can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/032920.cfm>

**1st Reading:** Ezekiel 37:12-14

This is the culmination of the dry bones reading (Ezek 37:1-14). It recognizes that Israel's plight in the Babylonian Captivity feels like the absence of God and therefore is a kind of death. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the people that God will end that death.

**2nd Reading:** Romans 8:8-11

The letter to the Romans is a relatively complete teaching or theology. In the selection we have today, the author is contrasting living by the flesh and living by the spirit. There are no sexual connotations in the term living by the flesh, by the way, it just recognizes that we are spirits who express ourselves bodily.

**Gospel:** Jn 11:1-45

**“Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?”** Jn 11:40

This is the last of Jesus's signs in the Gospel of John, the book of signs. It shows that Jesus has power over life and death. He has the power to give life, even if death is complete as indicated by Lazarus' four days in the tomb. The Gospel says that many who were there began to believe in him but “some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. (Jn 11:46) It was in response to this miracle that Caiaphas told the Sanhedrin “that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish.” (Jn 11:50) Why is something life-giving perceived as such a threat?

Martha and Mary, and the people mourning with them, didn't get Jesus either. He talked about the fullness of life given after life here on earth but they kept remarking how they wanted Lazarus to have continued earthly life; they both said ‘If you had been here he wouldn't have died’. Remember that the Gospel says that Jesus waited long enough for Lazarus to die because he “loved” Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. They were focused on earthly life so much that they didn't want to roll back the stone because it would stink; death stinks!

Jesus seems to be upset by the fact that people want to cling to earthly life as is evidenced by the fact that he expresses anger twice in this story<sup>1</sup>. Both times it is after people remark ‘couldn't He have done something to keep this man from dying. Jesus encouraged them by saying “Did I not tell you that, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” (Jn 11:40) They then cooperated and, therefore, saw Lazarus raised from death. What would it take for us to trust the Lord enough to experience the fullness of life?

We suffer many types of death in life. When we were young, we all suffered the death of innocence in our childhood as we began entering the world of adulthood. Many suffer the death of broken relationships, loss of someone important to us, loss of some capability we once had, etc. It may come in

the form of depression or other psychological or emotional disorders. It may be the loss of a job or a position of respect, etc. Many of these deaths result in disillusionment about something we believed or maybe the death of part of the false self we create to seemingly protect ourselves.

The Lord is willing to visit us in all of these situations. Like his love for Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus, the Lord loves us. It may seem that he waits a couple of days to come to us, also, but the real question is do we have faith that even in these deaths we will see the glory of God revealed?

Many people have come through these types of situations in life and have discovered that life is better on the other side of them. They are stronger, life is more secure, they achieve a certain peace. I assume Lazarus experienced the same thing and I believe these experiences confirm in us that life-after-life is a great gift that we will certainly receive from our God.

This week, as we approach Easter, it might be a good week to reflect on the little deaths we have all experienced. We might thank God for helping us get through those deaths and for the greater life we have experience after them. We might reflect on what parts of our false self must die for us to experience even greater life and we might ask for the courage to allow them to die. Finally, we might thank God for the vision of eternal life that he has give us and ask for the grace that we might truly believe and see the glory of God revealed.

## Reflection

“...he cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.” Jn 11: 43b-44

### Question:

What words or phrases jumped out at you during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they jumped out at you?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

### Alternative:

Reflect upon/Share about a time in your life when you felt a kind of death or felt tied down by something which held you back from experiencing the fullness of life. How was your life better after you rose out of this experience? How are you still “in the tomb” and what can you do to open yourself to the Lord's call to come out? How can you enlist your family and friends to 'untie you and let you go free?

## Verse by Verse

Jn 11:1 “Lazarus” | Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar. It means “God helps”.

Jn 11:1 “Bethany” | This is not the Bethany referred to in Jn 1:28. The modern name of this Bethany, El Azariyeh which is derived from the name Lazarus.

Jn 11:2 “Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with oil...” | The story of the anointing is not told until Jn 12:1-8. This story assumes that everyone knows about the anointing.

Jn 11:3 “Master” | The word translated in our lectionary as “Master”, could also be translate Lord or sir. It is difficult to know how John meant it.

Jn 11:3 “...the one you love...” | This simply refers to a close friend. It does not, in any way, imply anything beyond that.

Jn 11:4 “...is not to end in death.” | Remember that John uses earthly terms to talk about spiritual things. He is not just talking about physical death here. This story denies the finality of earthly death.

Jn 11:6 “So... he remained for two days in the place where he was.” | The Greek uses the subordinating conjunction “as” translated in our lectionary as “so”. It refers back to verse 5 which says that Jesus loved<sup>ii</sup> Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Out of love, he delayed long enough for Lazarus to die. Could it be that out of love he wanted them to fully believe in eternal life?

Jn 11:8 “...the Jews were just trying to stone you...” This refers to the preceding episode wherein Jesus is teaching in the temple area and the Jews ask him who he is. He ends his answer equating himself with God and they try to stone him for blasphemy (Jn 10:30-31).

Jn 11:9-10 “...the light of this world...” | Without being explicit, John is setting up the contrast between Jesus, the one who gives light and physical light from the sun with its limitations.

Jn 11:15 “And I’m glad for you that I was not there...” It is clear that Jesus want this experience to bring the apostles to belief, but it is not specific about what that belief is. We might think that it would be belief in Jesus’ power over life and death or belief in resurrection and an afterlife. I think Jn 11:25-26 and Jn 11:45 make it clear that he is talking about belief in Him, belief in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jn 11:24 “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” | Martha, like many Jewish people, believed in a resurrection, but she wanted her brother now, in this life.

Jn 11:33 “...he became perturbed and deeply troubled...” | The word we translate “perturbed”, literally means “snorted in spirit”. It describes an anger that could be seen in his physical expression. It causes me to wonder what he was angry about. It is repeated in Jn 11:38. Both times it is preceded by people clinging to earthly life and seemingly ignoring the promise of eternal life.

Jn 11:39 “...there will be a stench...” | It seems to me that this comment indicates a clinging to the finality of earthly death which Jesus is trying to combat.

Jn 11:42 “I know that you always here me...” | This sentence shows Jesus’ connection to the Father. This Gospel wants to make it explicit to the hearers that He is the messiah, the one sent.

Jn 11:45 “Many of the Jews... began to believe in him.” | It is the next sentence, which we don’t include, that is so astonishing. Jn 11:46 – “...some of them went to the Pharisees.” This life-giving miracle, and fear of the effect it will have on the establishment, becomes the reason Jesus is put to death.

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<sup>i</sup> We translate His anger “perturbed” but the Greek says that He “snorted in spirit” meaning visible anger.

<sup>ii</sup> The Greek word translated “loved” here in Jn 11:5 is different from the word translated “love” in Jn 11:2. Here he uses the word *ágapao* while in v. 2 he uses *phileo*. John uses both word interchangeably with no difference in meaning.