

Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday of Lent Year A

(John 11:1-45)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Sunday's readings touch into the most profound of mysteries, the mysteries of life and death. To hold a new born child or to see the sick restored to health is to experience the wonder of life. On the other hand, sudden death can bring unimagined grief and pain. The news this morning (March 23) tells us that 14,641 people have died from Coronavirus over the past two months. Some have died alone. With this pandemic comes an extraordinary outpouring of grief and fear. This comes in the wake of bushfires that saw the death of some 1.25 billion animals in my country and deep sorrow at the prospect of species loss. Death brings tears, even anger. Little wonder that "life" becomes a metaphor for transformation and new beginnings or that "death" so often signifies deprivation and loss.

The gospel reading is about the death and restoration to life of Lazarus, "the one whom Jesus loved". It is the last of the seven "signs" in John's "book of signs" that reveal the "glory" of God. It is also the greatest of Jesus' signs. It functions as a catalyst for the events that lead to his death: "...from that day on they planned to put him to death" (11:53). It provides the occasion for Jesus to assert "I am the resurrection and the life" and to invite assent to that revelation of his identity. It reveals the compassion and tender heart of Jesus who weeps at the grief of Mary his friend and at the death of her brother. It also reveals the goodness in the hearts of those "Jews" who share her grief and who come to faith in Jesus who raises the dead to life.

Though the story revolves around the plight of Lazarus, Martha and Mary are the characters who, with Jesus, occupy centre stage and into whose faith journey we are invited to enter. Martha and Mary are identified as "sisters" who live in Bethany. Are they blood "sisters" or sisters in their love of Jesus and the community around him, or both? Lazarus is Mary's sick "brother". Martha will later claim him as her "brother". Might they all be part of a little faith community in Bethany rather than biological siblings? A brief notice alerts the reader to the imminent death of Jesus: "Mary is the one who anointed Jesus with perfumed oil and wiped his feet with her tears". The reader will later discover that Mary's anointing of Jesus is "for the day of [his] burial". As so often in John's gospel, misunderstanding and irony function to bring the actors in the drama, and to bring us as actors in the theatre of Christian life, to new levels of understanding and faith. Right now, in the face of a pandemic, we are called, as sisters and brothers across the globe, to play our part so that this illness may lead to greater love and even to "life".