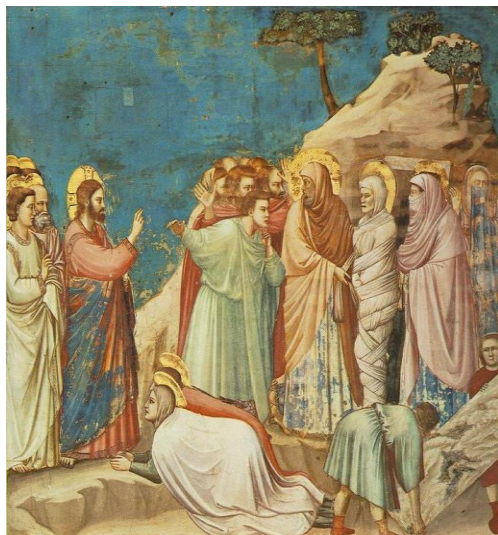


Why does God weep?

Fifth Sunday of Lent, A¹

By Fr. Gonzalo Meza



John chapter 11 presents the raising of Lazarus. The theme which predominates in the narration is physical life versus spiritual and eternal life, a life in communion with God.

This passage talks about the miraculous resuscitation of Lazarus, a good friend of Jesus. It is not a resurrection, which has a wider eschatological perspective, but the restoration to ordinary life. Jesus brings Lazarus back to physical life. The narrative is divided in the following parts, Jesus's journey to Bethany; the meeting with Martha and Mary; the raising of Lazarus, and the reactions.

Lazarus, Martha and Mary lived in Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem. We know by the Gospel narrations that this family had a strong relationship with Jesus. They were very close friends. When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he would stop at their house. This family of Bethany is an example to all of us about becoming intimate friends of Jesus. They opened the doors of their house every time he would pass by in his way to Jerusalem. But most importantly, they opened their hearts to the Lord. And he corresponded with an even greater love, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (Jn 11:5).

In his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is informed about the death of Lazarus. In spite of this news, he decided to stay in the place where he was for two more days. Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him" (Jn 11:11). The disciples did not understand his words. They thought Lazarus was sleeping. But Jesus emphasized, "Lazarus has died" (Jn 11:14). The Gospels mention that Jesus performed other resuscitations like the one of the daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:35-43). But in those cases the persons in question had just died. In the case of Lazarus, he had been buried in the tomb for four days and the stench was bad. Jesus used this sign of resuscitation to manifest his power over life and death and to reveal the Glory of God. The sign was also used to inflame the hearts of his disciples into a deeper faith. Jesus had said to his disciples, "Lazarus has died. And I am glad that I was not there so that you may believe" (Jn 11:15). Besides, in his prayer for the raising of Lazarus he said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe..." (Jn 11:41-42)

In his way to Bethany Jesus found Martha. She said to him, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11:21). Jesus responded, "Your brother will rise." Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection of the last day" (Jn 11:24). Martha had not yet understood what Jesus was telling her. Martha believes already that Jesus is the Son of God and that her brother will rise on the last day, but Jesus leads her to a deeper understanding of the faith. Jesus is not only the resurrection but also the life,

¹ © No part of this text may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission from the author, Fr. Gonzalo Meza.

so that whoever believes in him will never die, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

When Jesus gets closer to Bethany Mary went to meet him. She fell at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:33). Like Martha, her sister Mary had not understood either that Jesus was the resurrection and the life, and as such he had power over physical life, and life eternal.

In Bethany there was a big commotion for the death of Lazarus. Everybody was weeping with Mary and Martha. When Jesus saw that scene “he became perturbed and deeply troubled,” and arriving to the tomb Jesus also wept. Jesus is true God and true man. Jesus “as true man wept for Lazarus his friend, and as eternal God raised him from the tomb” (Roman Missal, Preface Fifth Sunday of Lent, Lazarus). As a true God Jesus has power over life. As a true man, he has compassion for all the human race, especially his most intimate friends: the poor, the orphans, the widows, the migrants and refugees, those who suffer persecution or injustices, those who are abused, those who are oppressed by evildoers within states, organizations and institutions. God weeps. And it is our duty to go where he weeps to have compassion and help them, just as Jesus did. St Augustine said, “Why did Christ weep except to teach us to weep?” Another spiritual author said, “God wept, because human nature had fallen to such an extent that, after being expelled from eternity, it had come to love the lower world. God wept, because those who could be immortal, the devil made mortal. God wept, because those whom he had rewarded with every benefit and had placed under his power, those whom he had set in paradise, among flowers and lilies without any hardship, the devil, by teaching them to sin, exiled from almost every delight. God wept, because those whom he had created innocent, the devil through his wickedness, caused to be found guilty.”²

When Jesus got to the tomb, he prayed to the Father and “cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The dead man came out” (Jn 11:43). The way that Jesus prayed was a teaching for his disciples and for us. He said in his prayer to the Father, “I said this so that the crowd may believe that you sent me.” With this prayer, Jesus shows us his intimate relation with the Father. Because of that relation, God grants whatever Jesus asks. What else is the Lord teaching us? Lazarus’ miraculous return to life is only a sign, for he will die again. Jesus is revealing his power over death and life. He comes to give eternal life, a life which conquers death. In this way Jesus is teaching us the distinction between ordinary life and eternal life. The Gospels make a clear distinction between these two forms of life. When they refer to physical life, they used the Greek word βίος, the root word of “biology”, “biography.” Living beings belong to this field because they have a physical life, not a spiritual life (Eg. A plant does not have a spiritual life). Human beings are also included in that sphere because we have physical life. However the life, which Jesus gives us is another form of life, spiritual life and life eternal. To refer to that life, the Gospels used the word ζοε, which means both physical and spiritual life. And this is the life which the Lord gives both physical and spiritual. In Baptism God gave us the capacity to have spiritual life and the ability to access eternal life. When Jesus says “I am the resurrection and the life”, he is saying, I am the resurrection, the physical and spiritual life. And I have power over both.

A life disconnected with God, leads to live only a physical life, with no spiritual life inside of it. A life without the Spirit is like that one depicted in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, a life “filled with bones... So many lay on the surface of the valley! How dry they were!” (Eze 37:1-3). A life without the Spirit of God leads to

² Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007). John 11–21 (p. 21). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

live inside a grave, surrounded by idols, bounded by power, money and material possessions. When we do not open our hearts and our minds to God we can become like those people who live a life without the Spirit. Like Lazarus when he was death, tied hand and foot with burial bands.

The Lord wants to give us something more than physical life, he wants to give us spiritual and eternal life. The prophet Ezekiel said, "Son of man, can these bones come back to life? Then [the Lord] said to me: Prophesy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life. I am going to open your graves; I will make you come up out of your graves. You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and make you come up out of them, my people! (Eze 37:12–14). Jesus is telling us, "Come up out of your graves. Come out." I am the resurrection and the life. St. Paul also tells us, "you are in the Spirit. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you." (Rm 8:10-11). St Augustine said, "He is not the God of the dead but of the living. For all live unto him. Believe then, and though you were dead, yet shall you live; but if you do not believe, even while you are alive you are dead."³

³ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007). John 11–21 (p. 15). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.