

I Am the Resurrection and the Life
5th Sunday of Lent (A)
(Jn 11)

St. John's Gospel only focuses on seven miracles performed by Jesus, but these are carefully chosen and given in great detail, in order to foster faith in him as the divine Son of the Father (Jn 11:15,42). Each miracle of Jesus serves a divine purpose, manifesting the glory of God in Jesus (11:4). The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and final of the great "signs" chosen by St. John for his Gospel and it reveals Jesus in his divine glory as the "Resurrection and the Life."

As with the healing of the man blind from birth, the circumstances of this miracle uniquely prove the divinity of Jesus. When hearing of Lazarus' illness, Jesus deliberately delays his departure by two days (Jn 11:6).¹ He is waiting until Lazarus dies (Jn 11:14), a fact he declares by divine knowledge to his followers when it occurs.

Just as he needed a blindness (lack of light) to illustrate that he was the Light of the World, so Jesus needs a death (lack of life) to illustrate that he, independently and in himself, is "Life," as only God can be the source of life. But the miracles recounted in John's Gospel are so powerful for fostering faith in him, because they go into much greater detail regarding the circumstances, so that they are impossible to deny unless the witnesses are willfully blind (cf. Jn 9:41). In the case of this final sign, the Gospel makes clear, as it did previously with the man born blind, that this is a unique miracle in all human history. Lazarus is not merely being "resuscitated" after dying recently, as happened in many other historical miracles (such as Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus, or St. Peter raising Tabitha, or the prophet Elisha restoring the widow's son). Lazarus' body is being reinfused with his soul, which has already departed for the underworld (cf. Lk 16:19-31).

Thus, just as Jesus looked for a case of *total* blindness in the previous miracle, i.e., a man congenitally "blind from birth," to illustrate that he was the very God who first created human eyes from the clay of the ground and gave them light to see, so he looked for a case of *total* death – i.e., not merely recent death – to illustrate that he was the very God who alone gives the breath of life to the clay of the ground, and enables it to live as a man. Upon arriving in Bethany, the disciples learn that not only has Lazarus died, but he is already entombed for four days (11:17). Though the Gospel is gentle in its description, St. John makes clear that Lazarus was a corpse in the process of decomposition (11:39).

¹ Jesus and his apostles are a good distance away from Judea when the messenger arrives, near the place where John the Baptist first baptized (Jn 10:40).

There were two important reasons Jesus performed this final divine sign in the waning daylight hours of his public ministry (11:9-10), as the threat of his own arrest and death were drawing near.

First, Jesus wished to prepare his followers for his own resurrection, which would even supercede the glory of Lazarus. Thus, as St. John observes, Lazarus was buried in a tomb very similar to his, with a similar stone that needed to be rolled back, and left behind similar burial cloths (11:38-44). When the disciples encounter his own empty tomb a few weeks later, this event will immediately come to mind (cf Jn 20:8), and cause them to believe.

Unlike the miracle of Lazarus, Jesus' Resurrection will not be publicly witnessed, and for good reason. Jesus Resurrection is not simply a restoration to mortal life as in the case of Lazarus, but the beginning of new human life beyond this world and no longer subject to the curse of death. The Easter Resurrection is the beginning of a new order, a New Creation, and as such it is witnessed only by those who have attained to baptismal faith. Therefore, the miracle of Lazarus – which still pertains entirely to this current order – is given as a stepping stone to faith in the Resurrection, which is the true Christian faith. It is given publicly to anyone who is humble enough to seek the truth about Christ, and recognize him as the one who comes from the Father to be the “Resurrection and the Life.” Even today, after 2000 years, the miracle of Lazarus, so carefully described in John's Gospel, remains a convincing public “proof” or stepping stone to faith in Christ, and his own Resurrection.

The second purpose of this miracle is to prepare his followers for their own baptism and death. Jesus uses the miracle not simply to emphasize that he *has* divine power to give life back to a human corpse. Instead, he uses the miracle to emphasize that he *is* the (eternal) life which is given to (spiritual) corpses in the sacrament of baptism:

“I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26).

Just as he emphasized through the healing of the man born blind that faith in him gives us the Light to see what we could not see before, so through the miracle of Lazarus he wishes to show that faith in him gives us Life to attain what we could not attain before. That is, eternal life.

Faith in Christ brings us to Baptism, where it is expressed and made a reality. Through baptism we become Christians, enlightened by his Light, and enlivened by his Life. St. Paul will later describe how in baptism we already die and are buried with Christ in his death, so as to rise with him to newness of life (Rm 6:3-5, Col 2:12). Baptism, then, is the true day of Christian death; that is the

day we actually leave this world, the old order of creation, and are born again, beginning to live anew in the New Creation begun by Christ's Resurrection.

By our faith in Christ, we come to the Eucharist, which is the communion of his *risen* Body and Blood. By means of this great sacrament, Christians quite literally have the divine blood – or *life* – of Christ flowing in their veins, and their formerly mortal flesh has been substantially united with the glorified and divine flesh of the Risen Son of God. It is right to venerate as holy the bodily remains of a Christian, particularly the relics of a great saint. Our bodies are first made Temples of the Holy Spirit in baptism, and by the Eucharist are made one flesh with Christ in his Resurrection.

Faith in Christ *is* resurrected life, life beyond this world's death. For a Baptised Christian, human death is no longer the curse of sin. It is rather transformed by the Cross into a discipleship (*"Where I am, my servant must follow"*). It is the final transition or passover from this world to glory. Thus Jesus does not even wish to use the word "death" when preparing for this miracle, but prefers to describe it instead as "sleep" – *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him"* (Jn 11:11). And while this "passover" may seem to take a long time, even millennia, it will be no more than an instant, a "twinkling of the eye" (1 Cor 15:52), from the moment we "fall asleep" until we are "awakened" by the voice of Christ on the New Day, as we are summoned from the grave.

Jesus had already told his followers, speaking of the last day: *"Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear the voice of the Son of Man and come forth..."* (Jn 5:28). But now the miracle of Lazarus is given as a foretaste and proof of that Day.

Therefore, let us be strengthened in our faith by this great miracle, the calling of Lazarus from his grave. It is greatest of the seven signs given in John's Gospel, that we may recognize and accept Jesus as the divine Son of the Father, the Resurrection and the Life, the one in whom and through whom we live never die.