

Sunday Mass Homily: Fifth Sunday of Lent, 29th March 2020

Many years ago I was on holiday with my family in Kent. We visited Dover – it's somewhere that's always fascinated me – I love to watch the ships coming and going; it's a place teeming with life, activity, excitement. There's a spot I know on the top of the white cliffs, from where you get a great view of the port below. In these days of lockdown the expanse of the sea and the vision of France beyond seem very distant indeed. That evening, as I sat there with my family, I watched thousands of people boarding and disembarking the ships. Thousands of people I didn't know; even if I could have seen them, they would have just been anonymous faces to me. And then a thought struck me: all these people, all these 'anonymous faces', are just as dear to God as I am. He knows every one of them: their thoughts, their dreams, their hopes, their fears, their successes and their failings – just as well as He knows me. To God, there are no anonymous faces.

St Luke's gospel tells us of another place from which you can look down on the hustle and bustle of human activity. Luke recounts a moment when Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem – journeying to His death – when He reaches a place from where He can overlook the city. All the busyness of human activity, trade, entertainment; a city teeming with life before Him. And, Luke tells us, in that moment Jesus shed tears over the city. He shed tears because He knew that great suffering would later inflict the people. The Lord weeps when His people suffer – He is not distant from us; He does not pass by on the other side. This scene – Jesus approaching Jerusalem – is very appropriate for us today, because it's exactly where we find ourselves in the Church's liturgy. We too are approaching Jerusalem. Next Sunday we will celebrate the Lord's entry into the city. But He is journeying to His death. His desire to be close to us in suffering is leading Him to the cross.

The disciples knew very well that if Jesus went to Jerusalem He would be put to death. Hearing that Lazarus is sick, Jesus makes the journey to Bethany, only a very short distance from the city, and the disciples know He will be in great danger. "Let us go too, and die with Him", Thomas says. But Jesus heads into danger to help His friend, Lazarus. He willingly puts Himself at risk to help another. In this moment, let's be thankful for the many courageous souls who put themselves in danger to help others, most especially at this time the healthcare workers and others who are doing so much to help those in need.

In today's Gospel we see the heart of Jesus' mission. He comes to give His life, so that we might live. He willingly goes to the cross, so that we can be called out of the grave. Lazarus stands for all of us. We too will be called from our graves – but at the cost of Jesus' life. But before Lazarus is called from the tomb, Jesus offers consolation to his sisters, Martha and Mary, who are grieving. And He Himself weeps – He sheds tears for Lazarus, because He loves Him. Grief is the price we pay for love. It's as if the Gospel points out to us: Jesus does not just weep over the city; He weeps over each individual who suffers. At a time when we are bombarded with statistics about how many people have died, how many are suffering, let's remember that these are individuals. The Lord knows and loves each one as much as He knows and loves you or me. For Him, there are no anonymous faces.

So today's Gospel shows us what is at the heart of Jesus' ministry: He comes to help us in our suffering; He comes to weep with us and for us, sharing our sufferings, carrying our cross; He comes to call us from the grave and give us new life. When He asks Martha, "Do you believe?", she replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world." Yes, the Son of God came into this world. And He comes anew. He comes to this world, to console, to comfort, to heal, to suffer with us, and to call us to the fulness of life. Before they set out for Bethany, the Lord told His disciples, "This sickness will not end in death, but in God's glory." It's clear how God was glorified through the raising of Lazarus; but in these words, I also see a promise about every sickness that is united to the suffering of Christ. Such illness does not truly end in death, but in God's glory, because those who die discover that death is not the end, but are called into the glory of God. Our lives do not end in death, but in the vision of God's glory.

The miracle Jesus works today does not compare with His own Resurrection. The details make it clear: Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, but Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days already. He is not going to rise of his own accord. Jesus walked from the tomb by His own power, but Lazarus needs the Lord to call him from death. In the empty tomb of Jesus, the burial clothes were rolled up and left there, but Lazarus comes out still bound by his shroud. No, something very different will happen on Easter day. Lazarus returned to his old life, and one day would have to die again. But when Jesus rose, it was to new, perfect and eternal life – the life we call heaven. A life beyond suffering; a life where there are no more tears.

Today the Lord shows us that He can call the dead to life. We see that He is God, Lord of life; and we also see that He is human, as He weeps for a friend who has died. We need both: a God who saves, who leads us to glory; and a brother, a friend, who is close to us in every aspect of our lives. Today the Lord weeps, but soon we will celebrate the joy of the Lord's resurrection, in which the tears, ultimately, will be wiped from every face in the world. And for the Lord, there are no anonymous faces. Each person is intimately known, deeply loved. For that reason, Jesus must now ride on to Jerusalem, to face the cross. And this, too, will not end in death, but in God's glory. And in hope for us.

Fr Andrew

