

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 11,1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you

that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,

The fate of those who have trusted and believed in Jesus, is presented by John, in his Gospel, in chapter 11, with the episode of Lazarus, which begins: *"..a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany,"* It is the only time that an ill person, in this gospel has a name. Lazarus means " God helps" The evangelists when they say *"..the village.. "* it means a place of misunderstanding, a place attached to tradition, that has difficulty in welcoming the novelty that Jesus brings. *"...of Mary and her sister Martha."* The evangelist, through three characters, presents a community, which is revealed below when he says, "the sisters sent", he should have written 'his' sisters, omitting the possessive the evangelist wants to indicate that it is a community.

Well this community experiences the time of the fatal illness of one of its followers, and sends to inform Jesus. Strangely Jesus does not move, but remains an extra two days.

In this passage we will read the essential parts only because it is very long, let's go to verse 17 .

"Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days." Why this four days? It was believed that, for three days, the spirit of the individual remained to watch over the dead body. Then when the features of the face were no longer recognisable , because of the beginning of the process of decomposition, the body went down to the underworld, so it is completely dead.

Jesus does not enter into the village, the place of misunderstanding. To meet with Jesus, it is necessary to leave behind the tradition, from the village, so *"...when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him,"* and meets him with a reproach saying *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* They had told Jesus that their brother was ill, seriously ill, but Jesus had not moved. Jesus seems to be absent at the moment of need, and Marta rebukes Jesus. But says: *"But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* Here, for Marta, Jesus must ask, so she has not yet realised that Jesus is God, that Jesus is the same as God.

Jesus replies: *"Your brother will rise again."* And receives an angry reply from Marta *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* When a person is in mourning, to comfort her he told her that the deceased person will rise again, when? Not only does it not give any consolation, but it throws her into desperation. When will he rise? Today, tomorrow, in three months time, in a years time, at the end of time? So Marta responds drily *" I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day!"* because this is the belief of the resurrection. One lived then died, and ended up in hell, then the last day, the final day, hypothetically, there would be a resurrection of the just. And here Jesus changes completely the concept of life, of death and of the resurrection. He says; *"I am.."* So Jesus claims the fullness of the divine condition, *"..the resurrection and the life."* He does not say I will be, he is the resurrection and the life, therefore they are here already. And then Jesus' reply is divided into two parts. The first, to the community that mourns one of its members that is dead, saying: *"Whoever believes in me,.."* Lazarus had believed in him *" ..though he die,"* even if now we see a corpse *"..yet shall he live,"* he continues to live. Therefore Jesus asks the community that cry for the dead man to have this faith. But then, to the members of the community that are living he says: *"..everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."* Those who welcome Jesus will never die. Jesus ensures that the experience of death will not be: death does not interrupt life, but immediately introduces a new dimension, a full and definitive existence. But Jesus asks Marta *"Do you believe this?"* She said to him, *"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."* Finally Marta has grown in the faith.

Let's go to verse 33

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." Jesus does not like this situation, because his community weeps like the Jews, like the weeping of the tradition. And Jesus, here in verse 35, does not begin to weep, he is deeply moved and troubled. The evangelist shows the difference of the two reactions ; Jesus is moved and

troubled, the sisters weeping is that of the traditional funeral lament, which indicated total desperation.

"Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it." This stone will appear three times, indicating that it is this that dominates the story. They were caves carved out of the rock with a large boulder /stone rolled up in front. The stone meant that between the world of the dead and the world of the living there was no longer any communicate

And here Jesus begins to give orders, there are three and the first is - *"Take away the stone."* Marta reacts, she is indicated as *"the sister of the dead man"* and says *"Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days."* Jesus says to her *"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* in indestructible life the glory of God is manifested *"So they took away the stone."* And here is the last of Jesus' orders *"..he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."* The tomb, the grave is not the place for a Lord's disciple, the disciple of the Lord, at the moment of death, immediately enters into the full dimension of his existence.

Jesus had called Lazarus, but Lazarus does not come out, a dead man comes out. Lazarus is not in the tomb, he is already in the fullness of the Father's love, and it is the dead man that must come out of the tomb. Here the evangelist wants to help the community to change completely their mentality towards death. The dead are not in the tomb, but continue their existence in the fullness of the divine dimension.

"The man who had died came out,.." and strangely *".. his hands and feet bound with linen strips,"* that was not the way the Jews buried their dead. The corpse was washed with water and vinegar, then placed on a sheet, but not tied up. Why has this dead person his feet and hands tied? Because to be tied up was the symbol of death. To be a prisoner of death, they are the ones that have been tied up, they have made him a prisoner of death.

The last order of Jesus is revealing: *"Unbind him, and let him go."* That is untie him, you are the ones that tied him up like death without life, you have tied him to the tomb. And the last command is strange, unbind him we would have expected: let him come, let 's go to him, welcome him, celebrate. But nothing like this, only *"..let him go."* Where to? The dead man must to go where Lazarus already is, that is, the dimension of the fullness of life, it is the community that must change mentality.

It is strange that this dead person comes out, not a word, not a thank you, not going to the sisters as they had crying, but the dead man must go. The evangelist uses the same verb "to go", which he had used to indicate the 'journey of Jesus with the Father. With this expression the evangelist enlightens us on the meaning of death: the death of a disciple of Jesus, not only does not interrupt his life, but it introduces a new dimension, a full and a definitive existence. The death does not take us away from the people, but takes us nearer, death is not an absence, but an even more intense presence.