

V LENT– 29th March 2020

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

John 11,1-45

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light." After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Then Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man,

“by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The fate of those who trusted and believed in Jesus is presented in John's gospel chapter 11, with the episode of Lazarus, which begins like this: *“Now a man named Lazarus was sick.”* It is the only time that a sick person has a name in this gospel. Lazarus means “God that helps.” *“..the village..”* the evangelists, when they give this indication, the village means that it is a place of misunderstanding, if not of opposition, it is the place attached to tradition, which makes it difficult to welcome the novelty brought by Jesus *“...of Mary and her sister Martha.”* the evangelist, through three characters, presents a community. That it is a community is revealed when he says: *“..the sisters sent word to Jesus,..”* he should have written his sisters, but omitting the possessive the evangelist wants to indicate that it is a community.

Well, this community lives the moment of mortal illness of one of its followers, and they send to warn Jesus. Strangely, Jesus does not move. (we will read only the essential parts of the passage because it is very long, we skip to verse 17) *“On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.”* With the moment of death, Lazarus entered the fullness of the divine dimension, but there is death. The whole passage is an invitation to the Christian community to change the concept of death. *“.. for four days.”* Why this number? Because it was believed that for three days the individual's spirit remained to watch over the corpse. Then when he no longer recognized himself, at the beginning of the decomposition process, he descended into the realm of the dead, therefore he is completely dead. Jesus does not enter the village, the place of incomprehension. To meet Jesus, you need to get out of tradition, from the village, then Martha *“...heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him,..”* and greets Jesus with a rebuke saying: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”.* They had warned Jesus that his brother was sick, that he was serious, and Jesus had not moved. Jesus seems never to be present in times of need, and therefore Martha scolds Jesus. But says *“But I know..”* she goes back to what she knows, that is, to tradition *“... that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”* Here, for Martha, Jesus must ask, so she has not yet understood that Jesus is God, that Jesus is equal to God.

And Jesus answers her *“Your brother will rise again.”*, he gets an angry reaction from Martha *“Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”*. When a person is in mourning, to comfort him, he is told that the deceased person will rise again, when? Not only is it not a consolation, but throws him into despair. When will he rise? Today, tomorrow, in a month, in a year, at the end of time? And it's okay for the end of time we too will be dead and already resurrected, it's not a consolation. So, Martha replies annoyed: *“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”* because this was the Pharisaic belief of the resurrection. We lived, then died, ended up in the place of the dead, then on the last day, a final, hypothetical day, there would be the resurrection of the righteous.

And here is Jesus' revelation, that completely changes the concept of life, of death, and of the resurrection. Jesus said to her: "*I am..*" I am, is not a claim of presence, but it is the claim of the divine name, it is the name by which God revealed himself to Moses: "*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 the life and the resurrection are here already. And then Jesus' answer is divided into two elements. The first, to the community that mourns one of the members who is deceased, says: "*The one who believes in me..*" Lazarus had believed in him "*..will live, even though they die;*" So Jesus asks the community that mourns a dead man to have this faith. But then, to the members of the community who are alive, Jesus says: "*.. whoever lives..*" all you who are alive "*..by believing in me will never die.*" Jesus assures us that we will not experience death: death does not interrupt life, but immediately introduces us to a new, full, definitive dimension of existence.

But Jesus asks Martha if she has come to believe this, and here is finally the growth in faith, "*Yes, Lord,*" she replied, "*I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.*" Finally Martha has grown in the faith.

Skip to verse 33 "*When Jesus saw her weeping,..*" there was the intervention of the other sister Mary, who scolded Jesus with the same words, "*.. and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*" Actually the verb used by the evangelist is not to move, it is to tremble, it is to repress a strong sensation. It is Jesus who cannot stand this situation, because his community mourns exactly as the Jews mourn, as tradition mourns. And Jesus, here in verse 35, did not burst into tears, Jesus wept. The evangelist uses two different verbs for those of Martha, Mary, the Jews, and for Jesus' tears. For Jesus' tears he uses to weep, an expression of pain and suffering, for the sisters' tears he uses the tears, which indicated total despair.

"*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.*" This stone will appear three times, to indicate that this is what dominates the narrative: they were tombs dug in the caves, and a stone was placed in front of it, meaning that (between) the world of the dead and that of the living there is no continuity, there is no more communication

Here Jesus begins to give imperative orders, they are three, the first is "*Take away the stone,*" you have placed the dead person inside and it is you that must move the stone. And Martha reacts, Martha who is referred to as "*... the sister of the dead man,*" This indication is superfluous, we know that Martha was the sister of the dead, but the evangelist stresses that this was the climate of death, the thought that dominated the community. "*But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor for he has been there four days.*" Jesus says "*Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?*" In the indestructible life the glory of God is manifested. "*So they took away the stone.*" that they had put there, and here are the last commands of Jesus, "*Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out,"*" The tomb, is not the place for a disciple of the Lord, the disciple of the Lord, at the moment of death, immediately enters the full dimension of his existence.

.Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Jesus called Lazarus, but Lazarus does not come out, the dead man comes out, because Lazarus was not in the tomb, Lazarus was already in the fullness of the Father's love, it is the dead who must come out of the tomb, that is, the evangelist wants to help the community to completely change mentality regarding death, that deceased persons are not in a tomb, but continue their existence in the fullness of the divine dimension. "*The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen,..*" which was not a way for the Jews to bury. The corpse was washed with water and vinegar, then a cloth was placed on it, but it was not tied, because here the dead man has his feet and hands tied? Because being tied was the symbol of death. In the Psalm 116, 3 "*The cords of death entangled me,..*" being prisoners of death, they are the ones who tied him with these bandages and made him a prisoner of death.

Jesus' last commands are revealing: "*Take off the grave clothes..*" that is, untie him, you are the ones who tied him up like a lifeless dead, you relegated him to this tomb. And the last command is strange, untie him and we would have expected it: let him come, let's meet him, welcome him, let's celebrate him. None of this. The last command strangely is: "*..let him go.*" but where should he go? The dead man who has to go where Lazarus already exists, that is, in the dimension of the fullness of life, it is the community that must change mentality.

It is strange that this dead man comes out, not a word, not a thank you, he does not go to the sisters who also had cried for him so much, but the dead man has to go, the evangelist uses the same verb "*to go*", which he used to indicate the itinerary of Jesus with the Father. Here, this expression of the evangelist illuminates us on the meaning of death: the death of a disciple of Jesus not only does not interrupt his life, but introduces him to a new, full and definitive dimension of existence. Death does not move one away from people, but brings one closer to them, death is not an absence, but an even more intense presence.