

Homily 5th Sunday in Lent – Year A 2nd April 2017

When I was a Catechist I used to say to the kids that one of the hardest things for anyone to understand about Jesus is: He didn't carry a 'God' card around in his back pocket that he could flash when things got tough. In the jargon of Master Chef he did not have an 'Immunity Pin', which could be use at any time to save Him from life. Jesus was truly human and truly God. During his life on earth he experienced all the emotions we experience as humans. Jesus experienced life as we know it with all its joys and pain. No doubt this created great tension in him as he understood both the full potential of humanity and its brokenness. For me nowhere is this tension better illustrated than in the great Gospel narratives of the Raising of Lazarus and the Agony in the Garden.

In John's account of Raising of Lazarus Jesus receives a message that Lazarus is ill but he waits for two days before commencing His two day journey to Bethany. Why wait before going to the aid of a person Jesus clearly loved? From the disciples perspective the answer was obvious; Jesus was afraid of the Jews who not too long ago had attempted to stone Him. Jesus

however understands the Father's plan and His place in that plan. Jesus understands that the Raising of Lazarus will be an unequivocal sign to the Jews that Jesus is truly the Son of God, the Messiah. By delaying His arrival Jesus is ensuring there can be no doubt that Lazarus is dead. Lazarus will have been dead for long enough that the Rabbis would have to acknowledge that the soul had left the vicinity of the body and bodily decay had commenced. Lazarus was without any doubt dead. Despite the animosity of the Jews, Jesus is resolute, he goes to Bethany which is only two miles from Jerusalem. I must say I admire the courage of the disciples who despite their fear of the Jews follow Jesus to Bethany, a courage typified by Thomas when he says: "Let us go too, and die with him".

When Jesus arrives at Bethany the full impact of following the Father's plan and the raw emotion of Martha and Mary's loss overwhelms Him; Jesus weeps. Martha and Mary are women of great faith they believe Jesus is the Messiah and they believe in the Resurrection. But great faith requires doubt. Martha and Mary's doubt finds expression when they say to Jesus: "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Although they are women of great faith

the death of their brother causes them great sadness. Jesus does not shy away from their suffering, he weeps with Martha and Mary. Even the Jews acknowledge His deep sorrow at the death of His friend. Even as Jesus is about to act, Martha still expresses her doubt saying her brother has been dead for four days. When Jesus does act He does not act unilaterally as God, He acts through His humanity by praying to the Father. Jesus' prayer is not for the Father to raise His friend Lazarus from the dead to alleviate the pain felt by Martha and Mary. No, Jesus prays for the raising of Lazarus so those around Him, the Jews, may believe it was God who sent Him. So Jesus was not the "Mr Fix It" who came to make everything "rosy". No, he came to share in the suffering and brokenness of our humanity with its highs and lows, but principally He came to do the will of the Father.

We often hear it said in our post-Christian society: How could God allow this or that to happen. Or surely a benevolent God would stop the suffering of these people. In fact I once heard the acclaimed atheist Stephen Fry argue that the existence of a particularly vile parasitic wasp, which kept its victim alive as long as possible while eating it alive, was absolute proof God

did not exist. The human ego is a powerful thing, we know how to “Fix It” and if there was a God surely He would be swayed by our mighty intellect. If God would just listen to humanity then we could create heaven right here on earth. Surely the reluctance of God to listen to humanity is absolute proof God does not exist.

The folly of humanity is its ability to listen to its ego its false self. My false self will even argue that if God raised Lazarus from the dead surely He could alleviate the suffering of a terminally ill patient I’m visiting in hospital. The fact is my false self, my ego, can’t see beyond the obvious. But some of my most profound experiences in hospital ministry have occurred when I have felt completely helpless, when I have felt the fear of the disciples, shared the doubt of Martha and Mary. In these moments my ego is silent and in that silence my true self exerts itself. My humble self who is without answers, who is simply still and knows that God is at work. These moments are not always pleasant but they are always profound. Where is Jesus in these moments? He is right in the room. He shares my hopelessness, he weeps with the family but he is always there. He gives the courage to a dying mother to smile at her family and say; “I want to die in my

favourite hat.” He gives the courage to her husband to write on the whiteboard at the end of the bed “My elegant lady”; or a daughter to say “You are the colour in my day”; or a grandchild to simply say “I will always love you Nan”. I can do nothing. All I can do is realise I have no 'Immunity Pin' and live in the tension between great love and great sorrow and know all this I share with Jesus.