

Fr Peter's Message for The Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year A)(28/03/20)

I am writing this message just after our first online prayer meeting, which succeeded far beyond what I would have dared to hope for. I had not realised just how much I miss seeing you all, and hearing your voices, and it was so very moving for me to be close to you all, even though we are physically separate. Being together matters. Perhaps one of the gifts that we will take away from this present crisis is a stronger realisation of this fact. I felt so encouraged and so happy after our virtual meeting together. Thank you so much for giving this to me.

Let me just say a couple of practical things before moving on to the scriptures. I have been learning a great deal about technology over the last few days! I hope that you might have seen the video of a visit to The Blessed Sacrament that I put on the website, and some more virtual devotions will be appearing in the coming weeks. Also on the website you will find links to the parish Facebook page, where there are lots of resources, and the Youtube channel where you can see some videos, as well as our parish Instagram account – if you follow the parish on this you will receive some little prayer prompts every few days that will, I hope, be helpful for you. I am a bit of a new boy at all this, and so it isn't as polished as it might be, so please be patient with me! I am so grateful to Alasdair for setting this all up.

As we come to the Fifth Sunday of Lent, what do the scriptures have to say to us? The Gospel reading is the story of the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary are particular friends of Jesus, and when he arrives at their home to find the sisters distraught and Lazarus dead, Jesus is deeply moved. He speaks to the sisters in great distress, with a sigh that comes from his heart, and then he weeps. The words that St John uses to describe the anguish of Jesus are very strong. When he sees the suffering of this little family it is as if he has received a physical blow: we can imagine him almost collapsing in on himself at the pain he sees on the faces of the ones he loves. This scene removes any idea that God is somehow unmoved by our lives, our problems, our sadnesses. As we look at a world that is in pain, that is suffering, a world where anguish and loss are becoming commonplace, we can only begin to imagine the ache in the heart of God. If two grieving sisters left Christ almost collapsed in distress, his face soaked in tears, what compassion he must be feeling for our world in these days.

But the Lord does not allow his sorrow to paralyse him. This is very important. Sometimes we can allow our sadness to overwhelm us, to become so strong that we feel there is nothing we can do, and we are tempted to give up, just to become passive and helpless recipients of whatever life throws at us. In today's Gospel the Lord leads us by example, and draws us out of passive despair, into action and hope. Faced with the death of his dear friend, Jesus does not despair. He lets the tears flow, because they express his real feelings, they make concrete the pain that is in his heart. But once the tears have flowed, the time has come for action: 'Lazarus, here! Come out.' What a moment of anticipation there must have been then, a moment of hopeful waiting as the sisters waited to see what would happen next.

So Lazarus is raised. He is raised and he leaves the tomb. But there is no doubt he will not be going back to life just as it was before. Things are not going to be the same. Lazarus is called out of the tomb into a new life; he is not coming out just carelessly to resume the old one. He cannot go back to things just as they were before, as if he had simply woken from an afternoon nap. Life had ended, but he has been given a second chance. He will die again, of course, but the Lord's love has gifted him an extraordinary bonus, a period of life that he –

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and his sisters - had thought was lost to him. As we try to adjust to the strange new way of life that we are experiencing at the moment, it is also very important that we give some thought to what our lives will be like when this has all passed. Like Lazarus, we will emerge with a choice: just to pick up where we left off, or to take up a new and different type of life. Pope Francis expressed this very well in his vigil in the empty St Peter's Square on Friday. He said:

"In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick."

This is, he said, *"a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not."*

We need to emerge from this crisis like Lazarus emerging from the tomb: as people who have, unexpectedly, been given a second chance. Let us pray that we will not go back to the same old way of living. The work of these days when we are, in a sense, in the tomb with Lazarus and waiting for our release, is to examine our way of life and make resolutions about how, when ordinary life is restored, it will be different. All the ways in which we are learning to be close, to be open, to be caring, to be patient, to be slower, to be more generous, less self-obsessed, less materialistic; all these must not be lost. There is work to be done planning for the new world that we will need to build when this time of trial is past. Our time in the tomb is limited, so let us not squander it; let us make it heavy with expectation, with hope and with a joyful anticipation of great things to come.

May God be praised!