

HOMILY FOR 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

(Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14, Romans 8:8-11, John 11:1-45)

Shortly before we had to shut the church this week, a young man brought a homeless woman inside and rang for help. He had found her in distress in the street. She clearly had some mental health problems and it was not easy to help. We spent a couple of hours with her and in the end put her up in a local hotel, accepting that this was no answer to her problem and the next day she would be in the same position, which she realised too. Agencies are all working from home, which makes absolute sense, and even if they were not, it would be hard to help. But some people will always suffer more in the kind of conditions we are living in at the moment.

The central figure, besides Jesus, in this Sunday's gospel is Martha. I wish we had had a Martha with us at the time. I have a feeling she would have given her a, now virtual, hug and said, "Come on, love, I am sure we can sort this out," and come up with some very practical advice.

I have a very soft spot for Martha. Her home, with Mary and Lazarus, was obviously one that Jesus could just roll up to and be completely at ease. An escape from the crowds, the Pharisees, and probably at times from the disciples as well, who were not always helpful or reliable (as he is about to find out in a big way.) Many of us will have friends who we don't see for ages yet when we meet it is as if we had just been together the day before. One of my friends takes this very easily. Instead of a Martha-like rush to sit you down and make you tea, she carries on with whatever she is doing or watching and shouts, "You know where the kettle is if you want a cup of tea." This can be after a five year absence.

Martha is first and foremost a friend of Jesus. She had seen some miracles no doubt and heard of others, but her relationship was not one of belief or worship. They were friends, and she had a great admiration for him, 'Lord' she calls him out of respect. In a way her relationship with Jesus is opposite to most of ours. We are taught to worship and believe, but friendship with Jesus can seem hard to achieve, if not disrespectful for some. So Martha has something to teach us.

As the gospel begins we can sense the worry in the two sisters for their brother, and the message they send is touching, "Lord, the man you

love is ill.” We would expect him to rush to his friend’s side, (even though to go puts him under threat of his life as the disciples point out.) But in an almost heartless way, Jesus has other priorities, even knowing the anxiety he is causing in the hearts of the two women. Lazarus’ illness has a greater purpose, it is part of the revelation of the glory of God to this world, a revelation that will bring belief to the disciples.

Naturally when he arrives Martha tackles him in her frank and outspoken way, “Where were you? You could have kept him alive!”

This is a turning point because all John’s gospel is about what life truly means. The first ending of the gospel is: “These events are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing this you may have life through his name.” But what life, what kind of life is Jesus really interested in? What is he offering?

The story contrasts two visions of life. There is the simply earthly human experience of life. This ends in tears, with Jesus own tears, shared with all those around him. A solidarity of mourning. It ends in a dark, enclosed space, bound tightly in cloth, and a smell that repels others. While humans are designed for life and society, this is the opposite, the antitheses of it, death.

But what Jesus reveals here is the life he is offering. This life is never bound, locked away, repellant. His life is directly united to, a sharing in the life of the Trinity, the glory of God; glory always means the presence of God in the Bible. As Jesus prays to the Father, is united with Him in prayer, he calls Lazarus out of the darkness. “Come out!” “Unbind him.” The life offered by God is free and unfettered.

This who accept Jesus’ message, who believe, are already swept up into this life which human death cannot control and imprison. “Believe and you will see the glory of God,” share in his life with Him.

Death is always on the news these days, and we may become inured to the figures, 300, 400, 5000. But each of these is a person over whom tears will be shed; Jesus himself will share that pain with us as a friend, as for his friend Lazarus. But now Jesus invites us, in faith, and with him in faith, to be unbound from fear and despair, if we reach that point, and trust in a new life that, as St. Paul says, comes from the Spirit of God living in you. A Spirit that can also be expressed, experienced as friendship with Jesus.