

5th Sunday of Lent - Cycle A (1999 - 2005 (Knox))
Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

The gospel says

*"When Jesus saw her weeping,
and the Jews who had come with her weeping,
he became perturbed and deeply troubled" (vs. 33).
"And Jesus wept" (vs. 35).*

In the past, as I have met with different groups of people and reflected on this gospel passage, an interesting question arose. "Why did Jesus weep?" If Jesus intentionally stayed away so that Lazarus would definitely be dead, and if Jesus knew that he would bring Lazarus back to life, then why did he weep?

As I have explored this question I have found several different opinions on this issue. First of all, some believe that it is because of the tremendous empathy that Jesus had for those he loved. He was "feeling their pain." A second opinion is that Jesus wept in frustration at his disciple's inability to comprehend. They seemed to always be falling short of the mark. A third opinion is that Jesus wept in anger and indignation at the Pharisees unwillingness to see the world as the Father sees the world. They were so caught up in their legalism that they refused to see the wonder of healing, miracles, and forgiveness, all signs of the presence of God's kingdom.

The Fourth, and most commonly held explanation as to why Jesus wept, is that he was confronting head on the reality of death. He was facing not only the death of his dear friend Lazarus, but also he knew that he was now looking into the face of his own death. The utter emptiness and horror of death overwhelmed him . . . and Jesus wept.

Now it is important to note that this Gospel was written for the Greeks. "To any Greek reading this . . . this would be a staggering and incredible picture. John had written his whole gospel on the theme that in Jesus we see the mind of God. To the Greek the primary characteristic of God was what he called *apatheia*, which means total inability to feel any emotion whatsoever.

How did the Greeks come to attribute such a characteristic to God? They argued like this. If we can feel sorrow or joy, gladness or grief, it means that someone can have an effect upon us. Now, if a person has an effect upon us, it means that for the moment that person has power over us. No one can have any power over God; and this must mean that God is essentially incapable of feeling any emotion whatsoever. The Greeks believed in an isolated, passionless and compassionless God.

What a different picture Jesus gave. He showed us a God whose heart is wrung with anguish for the anguish of his people. The greatest thing Jesus did was to bring us the news of a God who cares. That is why Jesus wept, to show us that God truly cares.

Then Jesus spoke his word of command which even death was powerless to oppose.

"Lazarus, come forth"

This reminds me of a strikingly similar scene in a movie from the 1980's. The movie was "E.T.," a story of an ugly, little extra-terrestrial being with the most lovable and caring eyes. When I first saw this movie I was with a catholic nun. After the movie she kept talking about all these theological images in the movie, like a loving being who came from the heavens, a misunderstood miracle worker, death and resurrection. She kept going on and on until I had to admit to her I didn't see any of that. I guess I didn't have the eyes of faith that could see that.

I have come a little way in my own conversion because now, looking back at that movie, I can see these images vividly. I especially remember the scene which inspired the song "Heart Light." In this scene E.T. has died. His earthly friend Elliot is grieving and crying intensely. Elliot is literally lying down on the capsule that is holding the body of E.T. Through the intensity of the love pouring out of the little boy, in the form of tears, E.T. comes back to life. The love of one small boy has brought him back to life. The symbol that E.T. has come back to life is his heart light begins shining again.

Likewise, through the intensity of emotion being poured out of Jesus (God), Lazarus comes back to life. Like his love for Lazarus, Jesus Christ (God) has that same intense love for you and for me. This means each time he sees a person dead in his/her own sin, Jesus weeps. We are called to have that same heartfelt compassion for people who are dead in their sin. When we see men and women whose lives are deadened by sin we ought to be moved with that same sense of pity and compassion. We ought to be perturbed to the point of tears.

When Lazarus came forth from the tomb his hands and feet were bound by the burial cloths. Jesus told those who were there to untie him and let him go free. In this way Jesus is commanding us to help people out of their tombs of sin. As the body of Christ, we are called to be like Christ. Like Christ, we are to say to those we love "Lazarus, come forth!" Come out of the tomb of sin which ensnares you. Release the bonds of sin that enshroud you. Know the love of God and live.

We can only hope to do this by first examining our own lives and the sin which entombs us. This is the baptismal conversion process that is the focus of the season of Lent. In true conversion Christ first calls us to be his followers. As his followers we are to strive for spiritual perfection as we turn away from those things which are not Christ-like in our lives. Then, experiencing the freedom and life that comes with the forgiveness of our own sin, we are sent forth to share the good news of forgiveness with others as we help them to be freed from their own sin.

Are you struggling with the reality of sin in your own life? Have you truly acknowledged that you have sinned and need the Lord's forgiveness? Are you having difficulty coming out of the tomb of sin that surrounds you? If so, Jesus is saying to you, "Lazarus, come forth. Come out of the tomb of sin. Come to me and live, and know that I am God."