

The Miracle of Compassion

Lent 5: April 2, 2017

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O God our Rock and our redeemer. *Amen*

I. Introduction

In our Gospel reading today, we hear the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As with so much in the Scriptures of our faith, we find that the story of Lazarus has many dimensions, multiple levels, many stories. Let us consider two of these that emerge, ... from Jesus' tears.

II. Jesus Wept (Frustration)

In our Gospel passage for today, Jesus arrives at Bethany apparently too late to save Lazarus' life - Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. And Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary reproach Jesus to the effect that if he had come earlier, their brother would not have died. Others, recalling Jesus' healing the man born blind depicted in last week's Gospel reading, others asked could

not he who opened the eyes of the blind man kept this man from dying? And Jesus was deeply moved. Jesus wept.

The raising of Lazarus is possibly the most dramatic of Jesus' healing miracles. This part of the Gospel of John is sometimes referred to as the Book of Signs, beginning with the wedding at Cana (water into wine and all the rest) and running through the healing of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus. Of course Jesus worked many miracles depicted throughout the Gospels. And of course Jesus knew that his miracles helped people to believe in him. Indeed, at the beginning of today's Gospel passage, Jesus hearing of Lazarus' illness tells his followers, "This illness ... is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus when told about the man born blind, Jesus said: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And before setting out for Bethany in the Gospel for today, Jesus tells his followers that Lazarus has died and adds, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." So that you may believe.

In the famous wisdom discourse from his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds us of the Judaic tradition of miracles as a sign of divinity – “Jews demand signs and Greeks require wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified.” Put another way, the faith that we proclaim is not propped up by Hellenic logic or the miracles of the Judaic tradition. But in Jesus’ day, miracles were still the touchstone of divinity. And so in the story of the man born blind, the Pharisees wonder, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And even the healed beggar himself proclaims, “if this man were not from God he could do nothing.” And note that in the prayer Jesus offers before calling Lazarus from the grave, Jesus says “Father I thank thee that thou has heard me. I know that thou hearest me always but have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me.” On account of the people standing by, that they may believe.

And it seemed to work. The last line from today’s Gospel reading notes, “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”

And in the passage from John's Gospel that follows what we read today, we hear that even the Pharisees were beginning to worry that because Jesus had performed so many signs, everyone would believe in him.

But Jesus had wanted more. Note how, in his last days of ministry in Jerusalem prior to his arrest and passion, Jesus challenged his disciples: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves." Jesus had wanted his disciples to believe without the need for miracles, without the need for signs and wonders. And so when I consider Jesus' tears, I wonder if perhaps these were tears of frustration. Might it be that despite his willingness to display divine authority through signs and wonders that would indulge the needs of his followers, might it be that Jesus, as he prepared for the final battle, for his passion and resurrection, and for his departure from the world, might it be that the sad truth of his disciples remaining all too humanly dependent on seeing miracles in order to believe was so frustrating, that Jesus wept.

And so for us the question becomes, what will we trust, where will we ground our faith in Christ? In the midst of our analytical, information-drenched world, will we proclaim Christ crucified, or will we too need signs and wonders to feel God with us? Perhaps we are invited to look not for miracles, but for something else.

III. Jesus Wept (Compassion)

Let us look again at our Gospel passage for today. When Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus some around him said, “see how he loved him.” When we consider the significance of Jesus weeping, of God weeping, we are invited to perceive the divine character of Jesus ministry – a character of compassion.

Compassion was an inseparable part of Jesus’ ministry and shows us what the Kingdom of God looks like. The great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart called people to embrace the compassionate nature of God:

“Be compassionate. . . . compassion directs a person to relationships with his fellow human beings.”

When Jesus weeps at the grave of Lazarus, others noted Jesus compassion for Lazarus and his sisters. But Jesus’ tears are also God’s tears, and Lazarus’ fate is also ours. And so Jesus’ compassion for Lazarus and his sisters becomes God’s compassion for us all. A relationship of compassion and solidarity with all sectors of humanity, a relationship in which we are called to participate. A relationship of abundant life that comes from embracing the compassion of God and sharing it with our neighbours.

For God’s compassion for us invites us to compassion for each other. Recall the Gospel story that we will read in Pentecost season, the story of the feeding of the 5000, when the disciples scoffed at the idea of feeding such a multitude with five loaves and two small fish (three months wages wouldn’t be enough to buy sufficient food). The story of the feeding of the multitude is shared in all four Gospels – underscoring its importance as a testament to the

compassion that infused Jesus' ministry to those in need. And so, through Jesus' compassion for the 5,000 – perhaps inspiring compassion amongst those 5,000 - they were fed.

Jesus' tears for Lazarus become the tears we shed for each other. When we weep for the starving in Sudan, our tears are not of an abstract sense of sorrow, but because we too feel the pain of starvation and the loss it imposes on families and communities. When we weep for the victims and perpetrators of violence, not out of analytical policy critique but out of shared pain. Out of compassion. When we weep for our sisters and brothers living on the streets, broken and abandoned, we weep because our compassion calls us to live into their pain. And from that compassion springs our empowerment to minister to the world. Out of our compassion for others comes our commitment to do something about it. And there are so many ways we can do that – refugee ministry, Neighbourhood Ministry, Pastoral Care, and many others. And through our ministries of compassion, we too are fed.

So, when we hear the Gospel news of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, we marvel at his compassion, we embrace the opportunity to weep with him, and we welcome the empowerment and fulfillment that such compassion brings. Out of our compassion comes life – an abundant life of ministry. Like the Spirit of God infusing life into the Valley of Dry Bones we heard of today from Ezekiel, the compassion that we are invited to embrace allows us to overcome the values and practices of the contemporary world that leave our human family dry and lifeless. And so we pray the words of our BAS litany, “Come Holy Spirit, breath of God, give life to the dry bones of this exiled age, and make us a living people, holy and free.” We plead for the Spirit of compassion revealed in Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus to enliven us.

When we consider the story of Lazarus, we are called to wonder, do we need miracles in order to believe? Or do we find God’s presence in the compassion of those around us. Just as we know of the wind from the rustling of the trees, we are invited to know that God’s presence is with us

through the compassion of the faithful. Maybe God's presence is demonstrated, not by miracles, but in acts of compassion – a kind voice for the lonely, a warm embrace for the bereaved, housing and social services for the needy, medicine for the sick. The compassion that reflects the Spirit of God in us and empowers us for more. Signs and wonders as proof of divinity? How about daily signs of compassion that testify to God's presence with us.

Let us pray: Holy One, we pray that your Holy Spirit will dwell in us, that our faith may be strengthened, not by signs and wonders, but by our sure knowledge of God's love for us. We pray that our faith will mature beyond the need for miracles, to embrace compassion and thus to be empowered to do miracles every day. In Christ's name we pray. *Amen*