

PARISH NEWSLETTER: 29/03/20. FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

PRAYERS PLEASE FOR– Dee Spears, Rosemary Allen, Ray & Margaret Lynch, Betty Browne, Elizabeth Leaver, Anne-Marie Hupé, Elizabeth Linley, Dora Nash, Kitty Holliday, Mary Hoban, John Warren, Fr Antony, Penelope Codner, Frances Shinkwin, Gill Flint, Joan Newbury.

SUNDAY GOSPEL –THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

This was Jesus' last and greatest miracle on earth and portended his own return to life at Easter. Lazarus had been dead and buried for more than three days. The mourning custom of the Jews at that time required burial as soon as possible after death. Soon after death a meal –prepared elsewhere- was eaten in the house with the corpse present. The body was then wrapped in simple white burial cloths and placed in a cave tomb which was then sealed. Everyone would accompany the funeral procession, the women walking first. After the burial the village mourners –who would include everyone in the vicinity- lined up to allow the family to walk between them but no conversation or other intrusion on their grief was allowed. Meanwhile in the home the principal mourning rituals continued for a week. Three days of weeping, followed by days of deep mourning where any kind of work or business was forbidden and the family did not wash and went barefoot. Everyone in the village would come to pay their respects to the dead in the tomb and the family in their home. So it would have been a large assembly that was there when Jesus arrived. Very much in character with what we read of them in Luke's Gospel, the reactions of the two sisters show Martha as the active with Mary as the quieter of the pair. Martha rushes to meet Jesus and we can detect a note of something more than just regret in her words to him "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." He seeks to reassure her but only her deep faith in life after death brings comfort. Her words are among the most singular in the Gospels because few people would have expressed in such clear terms belief in the resurrection as she did. Finally Martha and Mary both come out to meet Jesus. The closeness of this family to him adds great poignancy to this encounter. We are given an insight into the totality of Christ's humanity by the tearful reaction to their grief and his loss of a friend. It is one of the recurring features of John's Gospel that while it records the clearest expressions of Jesus regarding his divine Sonship and complete identification with the will of his Father it also provides examples of his entirely human needs and weaknesses. John was writing at a time when the divinity and humanity of Our Lord's true identity was beginning to be debated and false conclusions reached.

Jesus' statement to the sisters that "He who believes in me shall never die" should not be taken in the literal sense. All believers die. The meaning has to relate to one who has been dead in sin. This can take various forms; especially when a person becomes obsessed by selfish interest or has no sense of empathy with the suffering of others. Jesus has come to liberate and to lift up humanity from a state of alienation from God, the worst that can befall any of us. He restores the vitality of life in spiritual terms where it seemed lost and irretrievable. Ultimately the greatest gift available to us is immortality or eternal life which is the fruit of an earthly life lived in the light of Christ's commands and the effort to allow his grace to correct as well as forgive us in the many ways in which we can be less than conscious of our dignity and that of others.

Returning to the narrative of this miracle, when Jesus asked for the tomb to be opened –which involved unsealing the stone at the entrance to the cave Martha spoke of the four days of burial which had elapsed. At that time it was believed by the Jews that up to three days the spirit of the dead person hovered about the dead body, but beyond that there was no hope, for decay would have already begun. Jesus then called Lazarus from the tomb and to the astonishment of all present the dead friend came forth. We can only imagine the scene. As John relates the subsequent events, the miracle –far from convincing the Jewish leaders, though Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were the exceptions- only hardened their hostility. Even Lazarus was at risk as the focus of this amazing miracle. To his faithful disciples it was the ultimate evidence of his power over death, the last and unavoidable of the enemies of mankind. And so it is for us.

Our capacity to take part in these last two weeks of Lent is limited to what we can manage at home. Some of you will have located websites with live streaming for Sunday Mass and be able to follow that. I commend you all to the love and mercy of God and the intercession of Our Blessed Lady.

Fr Antony

RE-DEDICATION OF ENGLAND TO OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM

It will be streamed from the shrine on Sunday from midday with Mass following. If you want to follow it (from 12.00 pm) go to website, National Catholic Shrine and Basilica of Our Lady of Walsingham.

ANNIVERSARIES

Philip Tunstill, Bernard Lyons,
Requiescant in pace

SUNDAY MASS FROM BIRMINGHAM CATHEDRAL

The diocesan website will stream Mass at 11.00am this Sunday. It will include the re-dedication of England to Our Lady of Walsingham.