

Fifth Sunday in Lent Year A (29 March 2020)

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Ps 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-14



Next week is Palm Sunday, when we will come face to face with the fickleness of the crowds who one day are welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem with their Hosanna cries, and just a few days later clamour for blood, Crucify him! Crucify him!

But first, today on this the fifth Sunday in Lent, we have the story of Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus, from the gospel of John. In hindsight this story is a foreshadowing of what is to come after the clamour of Holy week dies down, after the crowds melt away, when the only ones left are the women standing by the cross, following Jesus' body to the tomb, washing his body and keeping watch.

When we read or hear today's story there is often a tendency to focus on the happy ending, the moment when Jesus calls Lazarus who has been dead for four days to come out of the tomb. And Lazarus emerges, bound and tied and covered, but now alive. Tears of sorrow swiftly give way to tears of amazement and joy for his family and friends. But I also can't help but wonder what it must have been like for Martha and Mary in the hours and the days before. How must they have felt? the roller coaster of emotions they must have experienced?

Lazarus, their brother was ill, so ill that Mary and Martha contacted Jesus, who was not just a close friend who has stayed in their home and eaten at their table, but the one who healed people, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, cleansed lepers, and healed all kinds of other diseases and sicknesses. Maybe, maybe then if he got there in time he would be able to heal Lazarus too. A message is sent. "Your friend is ill. Please come." And then they waited, and they waited as Lazarus became sicker, and still there was no sign of Jesus.

Then Lazarus, their beloved brother, their protector and provider died. And the sisters were devastated. They wrapped him in grave cloths and spices, and held a funeral, and placed his body in a tomb and rolled a stone in front of it to seal it. Many friends came from Jerusalem and were there to mourn with them, but so far still no Jesus.

Four days after Lazarus' body is placed in the tomb Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, and when Martha hears that he's close by, that he's almost there, she rushes out to meet him and cries, "Lord, if you had been here....." and in these words we hear all the despair, all the yearning and fear of those days spent waiting.

Most of us have known that yearning and fear at one time or another in our lives. For some it has been the experience of waiting by the bed of a loved one, hoping against hope that they

would recover, yet knowing, knowing deep within that it was unlikely. Others are waiting as they watch their own bodies or the bodies of those dear to them gradually succumb to illness and age, or are waiting and wondering how their troubled children or grandchildren will make it through adolescence and early adulthood. And indeed for most of us this yearning and fear is known none more so than in these present days of waiting as we deal with the uncertainty and spread of the Coronavirus, as day by day we hear of the ever increasing loss of life across our nation and our world, economies in free fall, millions of jobs lost as people wonder how bills are to be paid and households fed. And we wait.

Ultimately though, all of us wait for the redemption of God, that final promise that one day heaven and earth will be restored, and everything will be made new, and our tears will be wiped away and we will see God in glory. But for now we wait.

It is to the experience of waiting that Psalm 130, which forms part of our lectionary readings for today, also speaks. "Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy" (Ps 130:1-2). The psalmist speaks of that experience that so many of us have, especially in these present days, when we feel overwhelmed, when we find it hard to see anything beyond the darkness around us. But here we have an invitation to call out to God. An invitation to scream and yell and cry to God, to be honest about how we are feeling. We cry out to God in despair and the God who is merciful, the God who forgives, the God whose grace is beyond measure hears us.

Like Mary who echoed her sister's words as she cried out to Jesus, "If only you'd come sooner," we wait. And we wait, not just in despair, not just crying out, not just in silence, but we wait in hope. "I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption" (Ps 130:5-7).

This waiting though is not passive, it is active. We wait for God praying, reading scripture, praising God, and looking for where God might come to us, perhaps in a chance encounter, in an act of service, in a smile or a laugh. Waiting with expectation and hope, because God will come to us.

For Martha the first sign of this was the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Martha and Mary were blessed. In the end their waiting was rewarded, rewarded with a brother who came out of his tomb, alive. For the women at the tomb their waiting was rewarded too, rewarded by a saviour who rose again and offered resurrected life. For us, our waiting will be rewarded too. Not perhaps as we expect. But God will hear us.

Wait for the Lord, Be strong take heart.