

Fifth Sunday of Lent, A (Scrutiny) – April 7, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 565 words

If it were possible to quantify all the tears that have been shed throughout the history of the world, it's quite likely that the largest portion of them would be for mourning and grief.<sup>1</sup> There is a reason why, in our Catholic spiritual tradition, we refer to this world as a “valley of tears”: for the reality of death, which has existed ever since the time of the original sin, has caused so many to water the earth with grief-stricken tears. And not even our Lord was exempt from this. Yes, God – the God-man – our Lord Jesus Christ, also moistened the ground with his tears, as we heard in that poignant verse: “And Jesus wept”.

There is a difference between Christ's weeping and that of Martha, Mary, and the others, however. The verb used for Christ's tears is unique in the New Testament, and suggests a more subdued type of weeping, as if he started to get choked up and “misty”. In contrast, the verb used for the crying of the others implies far greater emotion, even noise: they were more likely wailing with grief.<sup>2</sup> Christ really mourned, but not as one without hope. He shared in the sorrow of his friends, showing that he was truly man; but as very God he held power over death, which he would also soon manifest in a surprising way.

St. Augustine, commenting on this passage, made a rather charming observation: Christ said “Lazarus, come out!” – calling the dead man by name – so that only he would come back to life.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there were likely also others in the tomb; and Christ's power over death was so great that if he had not specified, all of them would have come out! The fact that Lazarus was revived was astonishing enough – and “many began to believe in [Jesus]” as a result. Poor Lazarus would eventually have to face death again. But I think it's fair to say that this experience would have led him to face death differently the second time.

Yes, death is one of the realities of life that we tend to fear the most. So powerful is our will to live that we will risk practically everything to preserve our lives when threatened. Death is the great unknown. Lazarus may well have gone to his first death with that generalized fear. But now he experienced Christ's victorious power in a profoundly personal way. He and his sisters had believed in the resurrection – but now he also experienced it in the first person. Therefore, I wager that Lazarus went to his second death filled with great hope: a hope that included seeing Christ again, face-to-face, beyond the grave.

How do we view death? Is there anyone we mourn as without hope? Are we deathly afraid of facing our own mortality? Lent is meant to help us prepare for that moment, which will one day find us all: by turning away from our sins; by reflecting more intensely on all that our Lord suffered for us; by experiencing the joy of his resurrection at Easter. How afraid of death are you? May Lazarus – the Lord's friend – intercede for us and obtain the grace of looking forward hopefully to that supreme moment of our lives; more than that, the grace of living in such a way now as to arrive at that moment with confidence and trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Year of the Lord's Favour*, Vol. 2 (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2012), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> *Venit autem Christus ad monumentum in quo Lazarus dormiebat, et non tamquam mortuum, sed tamquam sanum, tamquam audire paratum, de sepulchro protinus vocavit; unde sequitur haec cum dixisset, voce magna clamavit: Lazare, veni foras. Ideo dicit nomen, ne omnes mortui cogereantur exire.* Quoted in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Gospel of John, Chapter 11.