

DATE: 29TH MARCH 2020

READINGS: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

THEME: "Lord, if you had been here..."

Graves are reminders. They are constant reminders. They remind us of pains, losses, emptiness and the temporality of human existence. And when we decorate them with flowers, it is not to show our love for the graves but a sign that we cherish the memories that lie beneath. They could also be symbols of untold sufferings in the life of a people. In the life of ancient Israel, exiles were 'grave-moments' in the life of the nation. It was in one of those moments that, through the Prophet Ezekiel, God sent them a message of hope. "I will open your graves... and lead you back; I shall put my Spirit in you, and you shall live".

But what if you have a friend who can stop it even before it begins? What if you had a friend who would not let you suffer death in the first place? Mary, Martha and Lazarus had such a friend. His name? JESUS! Look what he said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'

Then comes this fateful day, or was it? Lazarus was ill and the sisters sent out words to Jesus in a very simple but persuasive way, 'Lord, the man you love is ill', they said. They didn't make any request for him to come quickly but they expected him to come as soon as he received the message. Isn't that what friends do?

A long time ago, I heard a story about two friends who served together in the First World War. One of them was wounded and left lying helpless and in pain in no-man's-land. The other, at his peril and against the command of his general, crawled out to help his friend. When he reached him, the wounded man looked up and said simply: "I knew you would come."

But Jesus wouldn't come as soon as he heard. Rather, he decided to take two days off. No words to them, and no hurry to save the man he loved. Finally, after four days, he comes into town with his disciples. It was Martha that spoke our minds, albeit in a very gentle way:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died".

Simple. True. Fact. Martha was asking Jesus:

- What type of a friend are you?

- What took you so long?
- Do you even care?

The frustration was not just that this friend did not stand by them in a time of need, but that he has the power to stop this catastrophe but never did. Could you see the accusation in the words of Martha? Could you feel the disappointment in those words? It is usually the case that every disappointment in God stems from our inability to reconcile the will of God and the Power of God; between what God can do and what he does. Friends, three things are important to note here: -

- God moves when the time is right but never operates on our schedule
- Never interpret God's love for you by your suffering; interpret your suffering by God's love.
- God's love can include delays that you will never understand.

How do we handle these moments of seeming silence, and deliberate divine absence? The story of Lazarus teaches us that Divine silence does not mean inaction. Listen to these words of Joseph to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (GEN. 45:5). God's seeming silence always ends in praise!

"Lord, if only you had been here... "

"If only" moments are part of most of our stories. It happened to Martha, and it can happen to anyone. When that "if only" moment came, how did Martha handle it? She followed the "if Only" with a "but I know". But I know "that even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you." What do you do with those "if only" moments that God sends your way, when he 'disappoints' you in your legitimate expectations? Like Martha, follow it with, 'but I know'. Do not let disappointments make you forget who you have known God to be, and the things you know about him. He cares about you more than you can ever imagine. He may not be in time, but he is never late!

In the past few days, I have received tons and tons of materials on the COVID-19 pandemic, and I know you may have received some too. While some are educative, teaching us how to stay safe in this difficult time; others have chosen to highlight only the gloom and the grim. In all, it's inundating for me and I can't wait for all these to go away. The gospel of today paints a picture of that hope; not an empty, wishful hope but a very realistic hope. This is because, the friend of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is our friend too. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you". (Jn. 15:15). With three commands, he turned the hopeless situation into one of joy and wonder. He will do it again in our day! So, when anxiety and fear knock on your door today, just let faith answer the door.

With God, Every setback is a setup for a comeback – Willie Jolley