

PROJECT COMPASSION & GOOD OLD LAZARUS

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Jn 11.1-45 Ez 37.12-14 Rom 8.8-11

Another eerie week has passed, with no anticipated end to the current Coronavirus crisis, as the increasing shutdown continues, given the incredibly infectious nature of the virus. They say patience is a virtue, but it doesn't come to all of us too readily, as I speak for myself! Yet, the overriding advice is that the more people who stay at home as much as possible, the less the danger of the contagion spreading, so that our health workers and facilities can cope with the inevitable expected increase of cases, and without causing too much fear and angst, remembering that most who are afflicted will recover in time, with appropriate treatment. But we also know there's no miracle vaccine on the horizon yet. So there's no need to be totally paranoid, but to be vigilant and careful with observing the recommendations and requirements of the medical and scientific community, advising government and Church authorities. It's not the end of life as we know it. Normality will return in time, with hopefully a heightened awareness of our priorities in life.

Our current unique experience is a sobering reminder of the fragility and preciousness of life, the importance of family and friendship, and ongoing communication. We can be thankful for the positive and beneficial side of social media, for keeping in touch and expressing our thoughts and feelings, but without the normal gestures of physical affection, with which most of us are so familiar as spontaneous reactions! There are the multi-faceted means of communication, with family and friends, in the ways we can now engage, from phone to WhatsApp to Skype to Messenger to FaceTime to Viber! Arguably, we have too many options to confuse us.

And this is a time where we can take stock of our lives, and get around to things at home we don't normally make the time to get around to. For my sins, I have attempted to complete a 1,000 piece jigsaw of the world map, and haven't quite finished the complicated blue bits!! There's more time to play the piano to myself, and having learned for 10 years up to 50 years ago, I should be more in tune than I am! Then there is more time for catching up on reading, and perhaps I should reduce my material possessions, hoarded up over the years, but not yet ready to part with my singing and dancing collection of toys – Christmas and otherwise. I do find it a challenge to practise what I preach, as it's always easier to advise others than oneself!

And now we hear the story of good old Lazarus, whose name, like that of *Doubting*, but whom I call *Honest Thomas* (*as he asks the questions the others are thinking but too afraid to ask!*), has entered our secular language lexicon. How many Lazarus figures have you and I known

personally over our lives, where someone seriously ill, sometimes not expected to live, has made a remarkable recovery, to live on and continue to enjoy life, for however much longer. My mind goes back to my first *Lazarus*, a rather sick shut-in parishioner in Croydon, where he had more hospital stays and critical surgeries than anyone I've known. He made more comebacks than a cat with 9 lives! (*What's more, I could have become a doctor, after the lectures I received from his wife, about his ongoing conditions.*)

Australian author, Morris West titled a fictional account of Pope Leo XIV, reflecting his own experience of, and recovery from, bypass surgery as *Lazarus*. Then, in the political field, former PM John Howard gave his book the title of *Lazarus Rising*, as a reference to his own comebacks after significant defeats. There is even a *Lazarus Effect* in physics, and a film of that name too, so Lazarus would be surprised, and I suspect, pleased, to think that he has become such a common household name.

Coming now to today's Gospel from John, we are well familiar with the story. When I was fortunate enough to visit Israel for 7 days, as a uni student back in January 1977, we came across what was known as '*The Tomb of Lazarus*' at Bethany, about 3km from Jerusalem. When I enquired of the minder (*I think Muslim!*) of the memorial place whether it was his first or last tomb, he didn't understand the question! Lazarus might have returned to normal human life, but still has to face his own mortality in the end, as do we all, a sombre but real thought. And Jesus, in his earthly ministry, does not solve everyone's problems, nor heal every sick or dying person he encounters. The Gospels give us a few accounts of his power over life and death, prefiguring his resurrection to fullness of life. The Lazarus account is more about resuscitation than resurrection, by Jesus, who, paradoxically, is about to face his own ominous and tragic fate in the days ahead.

It is another very human story about family ties and friendship, grief and loss, which we all experience throughout our own lives. As Brendan Byrne SJ puts it well: "*In the persons of the grieving sisters, the Gospel also addresses grief in the Christian community. Jesus does not abolish physical death. Just as, to the sisters' dismay, he let Lazarus die, so he lets us die and lets our loved ones die... The emotion Jesus displays... shows a divine sharing in the complex emotions that make up human response to death. Though he has come to give eternal life, Jesus weeps over our death and the deaths of those we love and mourn.*" Jesus, with normal human emotion, weeps as he approaches the tomb, but then calls Lazarus forth, and so out he bounds, to be unbound and freed to continue his life with his sisters Martha and Mary, of their own fame, and his friends, as Jesus himself continues along the road to Jerusalem, and so, his own death, as a result of his antagonizing the religious authorities of his day, throughout his public ministry.

As we strangely prepare to reflect on and commemorate privately, or with our partners and families this year, those events of the final earthly days of Jesus, we are reminded and reassured of his promise of fullness of life for us all, despite our mortal condition. Let's be practical and

positive in living and loving well, and to be people of hope, in these unprecedented and somewhat surreal times, although things are very real, in fact.

As we know, the Project Compassion theme this year is ***“Go Further Together”***, as I recommend you view this week’s story, where we hear about 10 year old disabled Tawonga in Malawi, given the opportunity for her family to participate in a farming program to produce more productive crops and enable her to be educated and overcome previous discrimination. *(It’s on the Project Compassion website.)*. Please don’t forget to keep contributing during this difficult, uncertain and trying time, as I reiterate appreciation for your ongoing generosity.

PROJECT COMPASSION PRAYER

God of all peoples and nations, as you accompany us on our Lenten journey, may our fasting strengthen our commitment to live in solidarity, our almsgiving be an act of justice, and our prayers anchor us in love and compassion. Awaken our hearts and minds that we might be one human family as we all go further together. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

john hannon

28th March 2020

NOTES FROM PROJECT COMPASSION FOR 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

Tawonga is a ten-year-old girl, living with a disability. She lives in a village in northern Malawi in a region plagued by food insecurity and poverty. For most of her life, her parents have struggled to put meals on the table. Tawonga often had to miss school because she was too sick from hunger. The family also faced discrimination in their community due to her disability.

Since participating in a Caritas Australia supported program, Tawonga’s life has transformed. Her family now grows enough food to provide three meals a day, ending the struggle of malnutrition, and helping her thrive at school.

Tawonga, whose name means ‘thank you’, says her community is blessed with many resources, like rivers, fertile soil and hills. However, with dry spells followed by floods, armyworm infestations and crop failures, her parents struggled to make a living.

In 2016, Tawonga’s parents heard about the A+ program run by Caritas Australia’s partner, CADECOM (Catholic Development Commission in Malawi). They learnt irrigation farming and were given fertiliser and high-yield seeds. With these new techniques, their production of crops almost tripled.

The scriptures today are about life and about death. In the midst of a world with so much death, we believe in a God of life. Jesus says to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

We are invited to implement God’s vision of life. Jesus says: “Lazarus, come out.” Jesus says to those around him: “Untie him and let him go.” Our contemporary world needs us, the people of God, to respond to Jesus who invites us out of our tombs and into freedom; freedom to respond to the needs of others, freedom to let go of everything that keeps us from being fully alive.

Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. We too have so much to weep over:

In a world of plenty, 6 million of Malawi’s 19 million people require food aid.

23% of all child death cases in Malawi are related to under-nutrition.*

663 million of our sisters and brothers around the world do not have easy access to clean, safe drinking water.

The Project Compassion story this week features Tawonga from Malawi. In her eleven short years Tawonga, like millions in our global family, has faced the challenges of food deprivation. She is living with a disability and walks with the aid of crutches. Her siblings used to push her three kilometres to school in a donated wheelchair. She was often sick and missed school due to hunger. 90% of youth living with a disability live in rural areas of Malawi, leading to fewer education opportunities.

During the East Africa Food Crisis Tawonga's family participated in a Caritas Australia supported A+ program in Malawi three years ago. They now have enough food to eat and access to safer water closer to their home. Her family is benefitting from their ability to earn a reliable income from the sale of their crops. This has enabled Tawonga to continue her education and attend boarding school. The hunger that their family and community once experienced has given way to new life.

Hearing Tawonga's story can also bring about a change in us. In what ways can we go further together to ensure the inherent dignity of all?