

Not Immortality but Resurrection



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

*Ez. 37:12-14; Rm. 8:8-11;
Jn. 11:1-45*

If you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn. 11:22). Martha's reproach to Jesus conceals the unexpressed conviction that his friends will not experience death. Otherwise, why believe?

In the light of this, it seems that many crises of faith spring from the reasoning that if a person is good and believes in God then why doesn't God protect him/her? Unfortunately, Jesus never promised that believers would be exempt from death. Indeed, the situation of his friend Lazarus was a foretaste of his own death. As for the rest, we too behave in the same way when someone dear to us dies: we weep not only for the deceased but even more for ourselves, because in the other person's death we glimpse our own end.

Two details stand out in this Sunday's Gospel reading: Jesus' delay in going to the aid of Lazarus and the tears he was unable to hold back upon learning that his friend was dead. If we focus on the fact that Jesus deliberately delayed his arrival in Bethany, then his tears are unexplainable. If we focus on his tears, then the opposite is true. On the one hand is the fact that Jesus did not drop everything and hasten to heal Lazarus as would have been expected. He set out for Bethany two days after receiving the news, in spite of the protests of his disciples, who did not want him to return to Judea. Having decided to do so anyway, he explains: "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him" (v. 11). This is an incredible statement because Jesus considered death to be an inevitable—although not definitive—passage. We flee death and try to deny it, but it is our sure end. In order to believe in the resurrection, one must first believe in death because the point is not immortality but, to be precise, resurrection. Viewed from this perspective, believers do not have any special privileges. They die like everyone else and, like everyone else, they experience the death of a loved one as a loss. Jesus wept because no part of the human experience is foreign to him—not even death, which he shared with us up to the third day.

Confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus did not meekly accept the situation. He prayed to the Father as if the miracle he was asking for had already occurred: "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me" (v. 43). It is this certitude, which springs from dialogue with God, that can help us cope with the very human rejection of death and not lose hope. We should not be amazed that we, like Martha, vacillate. We need to strengthen our friendship with Jesus, allowing him to take us by the hand at the decisive moment. There is no other route. He is the only one who has traveled it and he is waiting for us at the other end.

Fr. Domenico Pompili

Where I Go

*Life is concealed behind death.
Reason cannot grasp this, but faith says:
I die in Christ. Where I am going, I will find him.
In death, I see life*

(Martin Luther)

www.paoline.org