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Pastor, St. Michael the Archangel

Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year A (March 29, 2020)

I continue this week with my Lenten Homilies focusing on catechesis taken from Archbishop Fulton Sheen's book, *The Life of Christ* (1954). I concluded last week's homily on the story of the man born blind (John 9:1-41) with Sheen's quote "Every moment of His life had the Cross in it." And so it will be with the event presented in John's Gospel when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45; also see 11:46-57). When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, he was east of the Jordan in Perea. Lazarus lived in Bethany, which is about a two-hour journey from Jerusalem and was within sight of Temple. To enter Judea would have meant certain death for the Lord and possibly his Disciples. Jesus, we are told, delays in going to Bethany, but not because of a fear of death, but because this would be the last miracle that he would perform before his death where he would show the power of his Divinity once again to "glorify God." Jesus knew and the Apostles knew what this meant. And Thomas utters these words "Let us go to die with him." Jesus was coming closer to the Cross.

"The distance separating Our Lord from the house where Lazarus lived" Archbishop Sheen states, "was about a day's journey. If, therefore, He remained two days more in Perea and we add another day for the journey, in all it would have been four days since He received the news." This fact is confirmed by Martha later when Jesus orders the stone in front of the tomb to be rolled back. ["For first-century Jews, bodily decay was thought to begin four days after death. The Resurrection of Christ took place on the third day in part to fulfil a prophesy that his Body would not experience the corruption of death" (*The Didache Bible*, footnote on John 11:39)]. In the encounter with Jesus on his arrival, Martha goes out to meet him. Note that she does not ask Jesus for a miracle, but she shows her trust and faith in Our Lord and accepts his will. Jesus assures her that he *is* the Resurrection and the life.

When he goes to the tomb where Lazarus was buried, we are told that "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Archbishop Sheen notes:

No worthy High Priest could He be without having compassion on our sorrows. As He was weak in our weakness, poor in our poverty, so He was sorrowful in our sadness.... The Greek word that is used implies a calm shedding of tears. Our Blessed Lord is described in the Scriptures as weeping three times; once over a nation, when he wept over Jerusalem; once in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He wept over the sins of the world; and in this instance over Lazarus, when he wept for the effects of sin, which is death. None of these tears were for Himself, but for the human nature which He had assumed. In every instance, His human heart could distinguish the fruit from the root, the evils which effect the world from their cause, which is sin. Truly, He was "the Word made Flesh."

And just as there would be doubt and mockery at his own suffering and death on the cross, there was the same here at Lazarus's tomb. "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died" (John 11:37). His Cross was present, even in this moment.

Jesus orders the stone that covered the entrance of the Lazarus' tomb to be rolled away, and Jesus "cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' (John 11:43). The sight of Lazarus coming out of the tomb caused some of those gathered there to believe in him. But there were still others who were not convinced. Later, we are told that upon hearing of this news, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to discuss the matter (John 11:45-53). At the conclusion of this, the scriptures report that "from that day on they took counsel about how to put [Jesus] to death" (John 11:53). Archbishop Sheen notes that this was a critical moment:

Many were the attempts on the life of Christ, particularly when He declared Himself to be the Son of God. But His death was formally decided upon when he showed His power over death by the resurrection of Lazarus. Previously, He often spoke of His death first, and then His Resurrection. This time He spoke of His Resurrection first as His enemies appointed His death. The empty tomb of Lazarus provoked the decision to give Him a Cross; but He in return would give up the Cross for the empty tomb.

Our faith is often times challenged in moments of crisis. However and whenever these challenges face us, how we respond can either help us to embrace our crosses, or to run and betray the Lord. Jesus tells his disciples on many occasions, "Take up your cross and follow me" (cf. Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). He does it first for us. He shows us the greatest love of all. Can we be greater than him by refusing the crosses of our daily lives? Do we want what the world tells us and try to live Christianity without the cross? Or do we, like Martha, Mary, Lazarus and so many others embrace this way that the Lord has laid out for us and enter his life? The choice is ours to make. Choose wisely, my friends.