

Catalyst to Calvary

When the Chairman of the Russian Soviets, Leonid Brezhnev was being buried in 1982, having ruled the Communist Part for 18 years, second only to the dictator Stalin, yet perhaps the most popular Soviet leader of the 20th century, his wife, Victoria, just before the coffin lid was closed made a religious gesture of civil disobedience that shocked communist Russia. She lent over his corpse and made the sign of the cross over his chest. Much has come to pass since those militant atheistic days with the reign of Gorbachov and now Putin. But was not her gesture then a sign of hope in death that brings life! Death and life are the two intertwined dominant themes this weekend with the miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

In the old testament reading, the famed prophet Ezekiel casts imagery from the valley of dry bones returning to life. It is somewhat like J.R.Tolkien's scene in the Lord of the Rings, when the King of Aragorn visits the dead to claim their allegiance. These Jews, however, had fallen in battle when the king of Babylon had sent them into exile. God's people had died but they hoped to return. While St. Paul, likewise, reassures the Romans of a future resurrection to a life of unending glory for all those who during their time on earth have been loyal to God and His Son Jesus.

The Gospel presents us with the close friends of Jesus. Lazarus, Martha and Mary a family who lived together in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. Jesus who had often been a visitor at the home, knew them well and loved them much. When word arrived that his friend Lazarus was dying, Jesus deliberately waited where he was rather than rush to heal him. In short, he let him die. God's ways are not our ways!

When he arrives and is met by the sisters who manifest profound sorrow at the death of their brother Jesus too is overcome with grief. The short verse simply reads. Jesus wept. The word used in Greek is only used on three other occasions to manifest profound grief – he wept with his whole being.

Sometimes at funerals one notes family members who weep in this manner, they break down in sorrow. God is always close to these people. Jesus needed not to weep for Lazarus because in minutes he would be restored to life, so why did he? He wept out of sympathy for his sisters. He entered into their sorrow. This showed that he was not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Man, fully human, sharing our grief and our sorrow and comforting us with his declaration, “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

The name Lazarus in Hebrew means “God is my help.” But on this occasion God was not his immediate help. For Jesus delayed his arrival and did not help his friend. Why would God delay? By the time that Jesus had arrived Lazarus had been buried four days. The heart said go but the head said wait. Love was trumped by truth. The truth being that he wanted to raise Lazarus from the dead as the ultimate miracle professing his divinity and his messianic role.

The resurrection of Lazarus was an astonishing miracle that resulted in the arrest of Christ and his death. In short, it was the catalyst to Calvary. What is a catalyst? It is an event or person that causes a change or reaction. The reaction was rapid and savage. This was the last of three resurrection miracles so what made it so reactionary?

The other two miracles, the raising of Jairus' daughter and the widow's son, occurred soon after their deaths. Thus, sceptics could claim that they were not actually dead but perhaps asleep or in a coma. While Lazarus had been dead for four days and they had expected that the corpse had already decayed somewhat, as Martha exclaimed: “Lord, by this time he stinks.”

The second factor that rendered this miracle reactionary was its proximity to Jerusalem. Bethany is 4 km from the holy city which was teeming with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims during the festive days prior to Passover. The likelihood of mass hysteria was a real possibility if thousands sought to visit the township so as to see or even meet the man who came back from the dead. The Jewish leaders were fearful of an insurrection that would rally the people against them making Jesus of Nazareth a dangerous individual. So they needed to react quickly – and they did! Next week we hear all about the sequence of those events on Palm Sunday.

The final episode of this miracle is the power of the word. Jesus goes to the tomb of his friend and says: “Roll away the stone, unbind him and let him go.” Lazarus has risen and walks. How many of us are bound in many dark places in our private lives? How many people are in bondage to an addiction to alcohol, drugs, lust, money and locked in the tomb of selfishness, all the time decaying within. How joyful would it be to hear his mighty word: 'Come out!' It can happen and does happen. How often one is liberated and set free in the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a good Confession.

Everyone alive today knows that one day they will die. It is a given fact. But most of us think that it will not happen any time in the near future. A wise person is always prepared to meet our Lord with a clear conscience when that time comes.