

Historical Commentary



Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year A

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 11:1-45 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

Augustine: Among all the miracles done by our Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Lazarus holds a prime place in preaching. But if we consider attentively who did it, our duty is to rejoice rather than to wonder. A man was raised up by him who made humankind. He is the only one of the Father by whom, as you know, all things were made. And if all things were made by him, why is anyone amazed that one was raised by him when so many are daily brought into the world by his power? It is a greater deed to create men and women than to raise them again from the dead. Yet he decided both to create and to raise again; to create all, to resuscitate some.

Cyril of Alexandria: The Evangelist has a purpose in mentioning the names of the women, showing that they were distinguished for their piety, which is why the Lord loved them. And of the many things that probably had been done for the Lord by Mary, he mentions the ointment, not in a haphazard way but in order to show that Mary had such a thirst for Christ that she wiped his feet with her own hair, seeking to fasten to herself in a more real way the spiritual blessing that comes from his holy flesh. Indeed, she often appears with much warmth of attachment, sitting close to Christ without being distracted by any interruption and to have been drawn into a close relationship of friendship with him.

Chrysostom: Many are offended when they see any of those who are pleasing to God suffering anything terrible. There are those, for instance, who have fallen ill or have become impoverished or have endured some other tragedy. Those who are offended by this do not know that those who are especially dear to God have it as their lot to endure such things, as we see in the case of Lazarus, who was also one of the friends of Christ but was also sick.

Augustine: But what was the message sent by his sisters? “Lord, behold, he whom you love is ill.” They did not say, “Come,” for the intimation was all that was needed for one who loved. They did not venture to say, “Come and heal him,” nor did they venture to say, “Command there, and it shall be done here.” And why would it be any different with them if, on these very grounds, the centurion’s faith was commended? For he said, “I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. But only say the word, and my servant shall be healed.” These women said nothing like this, but only, “Lord, behold, he whom you love is ill”—as if to say: It is enough that you know. For you are not one that loves and then abandons.

Cyril of Alexandria: Jesus saw that in the end, Lazarus’s illness and death would be for the glory of God. This is not to say that the sickness came on Lazarus so that God should be glorified, for it would be silly to say this, but rather, since the sickness had come upon Lazarus, Jesus foresaw the wonderful conclusion to Lazarus’s illness.

Augustine: Lazarus is sick, his sisters are sorrowful, all of them are loved. But [they had hope because the] one who loved them was the healer of the sick—even more, he was the raiser of the dead and the comforter of the sorrowful.

Ephrem the Syrian: All physicians wear themselves out for their patient lest he die. But Lazarus’s physician was waiting for his death in order to show his victory over death.

Cyril of Alexandria: There is audacity in Thomas’s words, but also timidity. It was the outflow of a devout heart, but it was mixed with a small faith. For he does not endure being left behind and even tries to persuade the others to adopt a similar resolution. Nevertheless, he thinks that they are destined to suffer [death] at the hands of the Jews, even against the will of Christ.... He neglects to look at the power of the Deliverer as he should have. And Christ made them timid, by enduring with patience beyond measure the sufferings he did experience at the hands of the Jews. Thomas therefore says that they should not separate themselves from their teacher, although undoubted danger lay before them. So, perhaps with a knowing smile, he said, “Let us go,” that is, “Let us die.” Or, maybe he meant, If we go, we certainly will die. Nevertheless, let us not refuse to suffer, for that would be too cowardly. Because if he raises from the dead, fear is superfluous seeing that we have someone who is able to raise us again after we have fallen.

Chrysostom: He leads her to the knowledge of higher truths. Even though she had been inquiring only about the resurrection of Lazarus, he tells her of a resurrection in which both she and those with her would share.

Athanasius: I am the voice of life that wakens the dead. I am the good odor that takes away the foul odor. I am the voice of joy that takes away sorrow and grief.... I am the comfort of those who are in grief. Those who belong to me are given joy by me. I am the joy of the whole world. I gladden all my friends and rejoice with them. I am the bread of life.

Cyril of Alexandria: Having previously explained the force of the mystery in himself and shown plainly that he is by nature life and true God, he demands assent to the faith, furnishing in this matter a model to the churches. For we should not vainly cast our words into the air when we confess the venerable mystery but rather fix the roots of the faith in heart and mind and then allow it to bear fruit in our confession. And we ought to believe without any hesitation or double-mindedness.... Nevertheless, it is necessary to know that we make the confession of our faith to God, although we are questioned by others, I mean those whose responsibility it is to minister in sacred things, when we say the “I believe” at the reception of holy baptism. Certainly therefore to speak falsely and to slip aside toward unbelief is a most awful thing.... In a certain way, as Lazarus was lying dead, the assent to the faith is demanded of the woman on his behalf. The same can be seen in the churches when a newborn child is brought either to receive the anointing of the catechumenate or to be fully initiated into the Christian faith at holy baptism. In these instances, the person who brings the child repeats aloud the “Amen” on the child’s behalf ... something we also see in the case of Lazarus and his sister. Martha wisely and prudently sows the confession of faith first so that afterward she may reap the fruit of it.

Peter Chrysologus: Mary weeps, the Jews weep, and Christ also weeps: do you think [all wept] with a similar emotion? So be it that Mary the sister wept since she was unable to hold on to her brother and was unable to prevent his death. Although she was certain about the resurrection, nevertheless, because she was without comfort at the moment, because its delay meant that his absence would be lengthy and because she was sad about his being separated from God, she could not but weep. At the same time since when death

appears it is so grim, so morbid, so very cruel, it could not but unsettle and disturb any mind, no matter how full of faith....

The Jews were in tears, being both mindful of their condition and overcome by despair concerning the future life.... As often as one sees a dead person, that often does he lament that he is destined to die. So a mortal cannot but grieve concerning death. For which of these reasons was Christ weeping? And if for none of them, then why was he in tears? Certainly he is the same one who had said, "Lazarus is dead, and I rejoice." ... When he loses him he sheds no tears, but when he lifts him up it is then that he weeps. He pours out mortal tears just at the time when he is pouring back in the spirit of life. Brothers, the nature of our human body has this tendency, that the force of joy and the force of sorrow both produce tears.... This is why Christ wept, not from grief in the face of death but from calling to mind that happiness when by his own voice, and solely by his voice, he would raise up all the dead to eternal life.

Ephrem the Syrian: His tears were like the rain, and Lazarus like a grain of wheat, and the tomb like the earth. He gave forth a cry like that of thunder, and death trembled at his voice. Lazarus burst forth like a grain of wheat. He came forth and adored his Lord who had raised him.

Cyril of Alexandria: The Jews thought that Jesus wept on account of the death of Lazarus, but in fact he wept out of compassion for all humanity, not mourning Lazarus alone but all of humanity, which is subject to death, having justly fallen under so great a penalty.

Peter Chrysologus: Spirit groans, so that flesh would come back to life. Life groans, so that death would be put to flight. God groans, so that humanity would rise. Pardon groans, lest the verdict be unfavorable. Christ groans as he subdues death, because one who snatches an unparalleled victory over an enemy cannot but groan. But with regard to the fact that he said that he "groaned again," he does groan again in order to provide evidence of a twofold resurrection, since at Christ's voice just as those dead in body are raised to life from their graves, so too those dead in faithfulness rise to a life of faith.

Augustine: Why did Christ trouble himself except to intimate to you how you should be troubled when you are weighed down and crushed by so great a mass of iniquity? For here you have been looking to yourself, seeing your own guilt, doing an accounting of yourself. I

have done this, and God has spared me. I have committed this, and he has still stayed with me. I have heard the gospel and despised it. I have been baptized and returned again to my old habits. What am I doing? Where am I going? How shall I escape? When you speak in this way, Christ is already groaning, for your faith is groaning. In the voice of one who groans like this, the hope of that person's rising again comes to light. If this kind of a faith is within, Christ is there too, groaning. For if there is faith in us, Christ is in us.... Why did he groan and trouble himself, but to intimate that the faith of one who has just cause to be displeased with himself should be, in a sense, groaning over the accusation of wicked deeds so that the habit of sinning may give way to the vehemence of penitential sorrow?

Cyril of Alexandria: Faith is a truly excellent thing when it is produced from an ardent mind. It has such great power that not only is the believer healed but in fact others also can be healed besides those who believe. For instance ... Lazarus is saved by the faith of his sister to whom the Lord said, "If you believe you shall see the glory of God," which is like saying, "Since Lazarus, being dead, is not able to believe, you then are to fill up the faith that is lacking in him that is dead."

Andrew of Crete:

Lazarus, Come out!

It is the voice of the Lord, the proclamation of the king—an authoritative command.

Come out!

Leave corruption behind and receive the flesh of incorruption.

Lazarus, Come out!

Let them know that the time has come when those in the tombs will hear the voice of the Son of man. Once they have heard they will come alive.

Come out!

The stumbling block is taken away.

Come to me—I am calling you.

Come out!

As a friend, I am calling you; as Lord I am commanding you....

Come out

Covered with the burial cloth so that they won't think you were only pretending to be dead. Let them see your hands and feet bound and your face covered. Let them see if they still do not believe the miracle.

Come out!

Let the stench of your body prove the resurrection. Let the burial linen be undone so that they can recognize the one who was put in the tomb.

Come out!

Come alive and enliven! Come out of the tomb. Teach them how all creation will be enlivened in a moment when the trumpet's voice proclaims the resurrection of the dead.

Come out!

Let breath appear in your nostrils, let blood pulse through your veins, let the voice sound in your larynx, let words fill your ears, let vision enlighten your eyes, let the sense of smell fill your senses, walk as nature intended as your earthly tent is enlivened by your soul.

Come out!

Leave behind the burial cloth and glorify the miracle. Leave the revolting stench of death and proclaim the strength of my power.

I'm calling you out!

Come out.

I, who said, "Let there be light, let there be firmament."

Athanasius: "Come forth." See, I am standing by you. I am your Lord. You are the work of my hands. Why have you not known me, because in the beginning I myself formed Adam from the earth and gave him breath? Open your mouth yourself so that I may give you breath. Stand on your feet and receive strength for yourself. For I am the strength of the whole creation. Stretch out your hands, and I shall give them strength. For I am the straight staff. I command the foul odor to depart from you. For I am the sweet odor of the trees of paradise. Behold, the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet will be fulfilled in you, namely, "I shall open your tombs, and I shall bring you forth."

John Calvin: For not only did Christ give a remarkable proof of his Divine power in raising Lazarus, but he likewise placed before our eyes a lively image of our future resurrection. This might indeed be said to be the latest and concluding action of his life, for the time of his death was already at hand. We need not wonder, therefore, if he illustrated his own glory, in an extraordinary manner, in that work, the remembrance of which he wished to be deeply impressed on their minds, that it might seal, in some respects, all that had gone before. There were others whom Christ had raised from the dead, but he now displays his power on a rotting corpse. But the circumstances which tend to magnify the glory of God in this miracle shall be pointed out in their proper place and order.

Vs. 3. Lo, he whom thou lovest is sick. The message is short, but Christ might easily learn from it what the two sisters wished; for, under this complaint, they modestly state their request that he would be pleased to grant them relief. We are not forbidden, indeed, to use a longer form of prayer; but our principal object ought to be, to pour into the bosom of God all our cares, and every thing that distresses us, that he may afford deliverance. Such is the manner in which the women act towards Christ: they plainly tell him their distress, in consequence of which they expect some alleviation. We ought also to observe that, from Christ's love, they are led to entertain a confident hope of obtaining assistance, he whom thou lovest; and this is the invariable rule of praying aright; for, where the love of God is, there deliverance is certain and at hand, because God cannot forsake him whom he loveth

Vs 5. And Jesus loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus. These two things appear to be inconsistent with each other, that Christ remains two days beyond Jordan, as if he did not care about the life of Lazarus, and yet the Evangelist says, that Christ loved him and his sisters; for, since love produces anxiety, he ought to have hastened immediately. As Christ is the only mirror of the grace of God, we are taught by this delay on his part, that we ought not to judge of the love of God from the condition which we see before our eyes. When we have prayed to him, he often delays his assistance, either that he may increase still more our ardor in prayer, or that he may exercise our patience, and, at the same time, accustom us to obedience. Let believers then implore the assistance of God, but let them also learn to suspend their desires, if he does not stretch out his hand for their assistance as soon as they may think that necessity requires; for, whatever may be his delay, he never sleeps, and never forgets his people. Yet let us also be fully assured that he wishes all whom he loves to be saved.

Vs 33. He groaned in his spirit. If Christ had not been excited to compassion by their tears, he would rather have kept his countenance unmoved, but when, of his own accord, he conforms to those mourners, so far as to weep along with them, he gives proof that he has sympathy, (συμπάθεια.) For the cause of this feeling is, in my opinion, expressed by the Evangelist, when he says that Christ saw Mary and the rest weeping Yet I have no doubt that Christ contemplated something higher, namely, the general misery of the whole human race; for he knew well what had been enjoined on him by the Father, and why he was sent into the world, namely, to free us from all evils. As he has actually done this, so

he intended to show that he accomplished it with warmth and earnestness. Accordingly, when he is about to raise Lazarus, before granting deliverance or aid, by the groaning of his spirit, by a strong feeling of grief, and by tears, he shows that he is as much affected by our distresses as if he had endured them in his own person.

Vs 38. Jesus therefore again groaning within himself. Christ does not approach the sepulcher as an idle spectator, but as a champion who prepares for a contest; and therefore we need not wonder that he again groans; for the violent tyranny of death, which he had to conquer, is placed before his eyes. Some explain this groan to have arisen from indignation, because he was offended at that unbelief of which we have spoken. But another reason appears to me far more appropriate, namely, that he contemplated the transaction itself rather than the men.