

## Homily for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent Year C

By Fr Steele Hartmann

Miracle stories are really action parables, that is, being a parable they are really saying something other than what they seem to say. We miss the point if we focus on the obvious. So early in John's Gospel we are told, "During his stay in Jerusalem for the Passover many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he gave, but Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them" (Jn 2:23-24). Jesus is not interested in those who see him merely as a wonder-worker. His constant refrain in the Synoptic Gospels is: "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear" (eg. Lk 8:8).

In John's Gospel the emphasis is on seeing, on opening the eyes of the blind (eg. Jh 9:6). Either way the result is the same: If you have eyes to see, ears to hear, you will understand. This concern with 'seeing' and 'hearing' is in line with the prophecy of Isaiah, who was sent by God to say to his people who had turned from him: "Go and say to this people, 'Hear and hear again, but do not understand; see and see again, but do not perceive'. Make the heart of this people calloused, its ears dull, shut its eyes, so that it will not see with its eyes, hear with its ears, understand with its heart, and be converted and healed" (Isa 6:9-10).

St John reports only a few of Jesus' miracles, only seven. He calls them 'signs'. Signs, of course, point to something else. At the end of his Gospel, St John says to us, "There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (Jn 20:30-31). These signs, then, these miracles, are to help us to 'see' something about Jesus that will lead us to life — and this is the real miracle worked in them! In them Jesus takes to himself the role of Isaiah the prophet: "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Lk 4:18). When John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus and ask, "Are

you the one, or have we to wait for another?” Jesus says to them, “Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor, and happy is the one who does not lose faith in me” (Lk 7:22-23). Jesus’ signs and miracles are meant only to bring us to the conviction that he is the one. They are meant to soften our hard hearts, to unblock our deaf ears, to open our blind eyes — that we may see with our eyes, hear with our ears, understand with our heart, and be converted and healed. If they fail to do this, then they are merely wonders to behold, of no greater merit than a circus act, amusing to watch but of no great consequence.

So what are we to make of this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead? Our first reading is helpful here. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God says to his people living in exile, “I am now going to open your graves; I mean to raise you from your graves, my people and lead you back to the soil of Israel. And you will know that I am YHWH, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people. And I will put a new spirit in you, and you will live, and I will resettle you on your own soil” (Ezek 37: 12-14). Here the dry bones lying in their grave are identified with Israel in exile, and the resurrection of these bones with Israel’s restoration to its homeland after the Babylonian Exile. In John’s Gospel it is no accident that he story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is told just prior to that of Jesus’ own Resurrection. They are related to one another as the Now is to the End Time, the Last Day.

So to understand Lazarus’ Resurrection we need to look to the Now for an explanation. In the Book of Genesis, in the story of The Fall we learn that, as a result of sin, we humans were expelled from Paradise and sent into exile, there to die in our alienation from God. When we sin, we don’t just do something wrong. Being embodied spirit, when we sin, we sin against someone: our alienation from God is manifested in our alienation from one another; in effect we are dead to one another. But, as with Israel in Ezekiel’s day, in our repentance, in our reconciliation with one another, in our return from the exile to which our sin had banished us, we are raised again to new life with one another. This manner of speaking is found also in Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son. When the wayward son returns to his

father, his father rejoices and throws a party “because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found” (Lk 15:24).

In John’s day, the community of believers was challenged each time one of their number died: If Jesus gave us eternal life, why are believers still dying? So St John tells them this story of the raising of Lazarus. Their doubt is put onto the lips of both Martha and Mary: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died” — and, as with Martha and Mary, as with John’s community, and as with ourselves, in the face of death Jesus is not here and we still die. John’s challenge to his community, and to us, is put onto the lips of Jesus: “I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”. John’s Jesus did not come to do away with physical death; he came that we might have life (Jn 3:16). The invitation is to look not at death, but for signs of life (Ezek 37:8). This Jesus, after his Resurrection, breathed his Spirit on his community. This Spirit is a Spirit of Reconciliation (cf. Jn 20:22-23; Ezek 37:9-10). Just as Jesus’ raising of Lazarus restored him to life and communion with Martha and Mary, St John is inviting his community to see in their communion through their forgiveness of one another, to see in their life of love for one another, their own resurrection from death to new life — and this in the Now. We, too, are invited to see in our life together with, in and through Christ our own rising to new life. This is Resurrection in the Now!

But this miracle of our life together, though constantly assailed by sin and death but even more constantly revived by our forgiveness of one another, is only meant as a sign. The raising of Lazarus only has meaning in its proximity to Jesus’ own Resurrection. So our life together in the Now speaks to our life together eternally in the End Time; in our rising to new life Now in Christ is the sign of the promise held out Jesus’ Resurrection, just as Lazarus’ rising is a sign of Christ’s Resurrection. What makes possible our life together. Now is the Resurrected Christ’s gift to us of his Spirit. This is what our opened eyes are to see. It is that same spirit that put new life into the Israelites and brought them back from their graves in Exile, and which now brings us back from our alienation from one another through sin, our death to one another, and raises us to new life together.

In this new life together we are invited to see the Resurrected One's gift to us of God's own Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 37:9-10). If we can see this, then we can readily grasp St Paul's confidence as he speaks to us in our second reading, "You are in the realm of the spirit since the Spirit of God dwells in you — anyone who does not have this Spirit of Christ is not of him. And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit indwelling in you" (Rom 8:9-11). If we see in our life together in Christ that we have this Spirit, we can be confident in the face of death that we will live as Christ lives. Jesus' challenge to us today is: "Do you believe this?"

Next Sunday is Passion Sunday. Then we shall read again the story of Jesus' crucifixion. There at the end, with Jesus nailed to the cross along with two others, we have the story of life, with Jesus' part in it, stripped down to its essentials. Our life is finite and we are powerless to do anything about it. At the end is death, a full stop: that's it! As they were both strung up there together waiting to die, the Good Thief says to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42). In the face of their predicament what possible sense could this make — unless he 'knows' something about Jesus. This something strays into the realm of faith and allows him to go confidently into the tomb with Jesus holding on to life. And Jesus' word to us this morning — "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" — is here translated as "Indeed, I promise you, this day you shall be with me in paradise." In their predicament, the implicit challenge, though, is still the same: Do you believe this? Today's Gospel story is meant to tell us something about Jesus that will help us to live in the face of death, that we might answer, together with Martha, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world" (Jn 11:27). If we can say this, we can live, come what may. As to the problem of sin, suffering and death in the world, God's answer to us in Christ crucified is simply, "Yes, I know. I am there with you, even there. Do not be afraid" (eg. Jn 6:20; Gal 3:1).