

Our Gospel this morning brings us to a turning point.

This Lenten season has seen us journey with Jesus through the Gospel of John. We have seen Jesus through the temptation in the wilderness. We listened in amazement with the Samaritan woman at the well as Jesus promised the gift of living water. Last week we watched as Jesus, the light of the world, gave the blind man sight.

But now the mood has shifted. Dark clouds are forming on the horizon. The princes of this world are looking to snuff out the light of the world: before long we will be in Jerusalem watching Jesus be tried, crucified and buried. And today's reading finds Jesus weeping at another tomb. Not his own tomb, but that of Lazarus.

The tomb belongs to a man named Lazarus of Bethany. We don't know much about Lazarus, only that he was brother to Jesus's dear friends Mary and Martha. Those two quarrelling sisters and the quiet Lazarus make up a happy, rambunctious family. The Gospels record only one of Jesus's visits to the house of Mary and Martha but I think he must have stayed with them many times, he and the disciples sharing many happy meals and evenings over the course of their ministry.

But when Lazarus falls ill, Jesus is nowhere to be found. Indeed, this famed healer has skipped town, left the region, and with good reason: the Pharisees and the temple authorities want to kill him. He's keeping a low profile. At least, that's what the disciples think. They must have been relieved to lose some of the heat. For once their master is being sensible!

But Jesus, of course, has other things than his personal safety on his mind. Soon he will return to that dangerous country—but not too soon!

Jesus's delayed return to Bethany may strike some as callous in light of the scenes of grief that await him. Anyone who has dealt with grief at the loss of a loved one will know the pain behind Mary and Martha's joint accusation: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." It is at the grave, the place where the power of God is most potent, that God's seeming inaction can seem at its most severe.

Action or inaction? Mary and Martha want one thing, the disciples want another. The disciples are sure that their master is going to his death, and theirs too. Thomas even declares: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

“Let us go, that we may die with him.” Bold words, considering that the disciples will soon desert Jesus en masse. And yet words we should all consider as we draw closer to the cross and the Easter morning beyond it. “Let us go, that we may die with him,” is the message at the heart of our Christian tradition.

Our Episcopalian tradition does not emphasize “born again” vocabulary as much as it could, but we are indeed born again. At our Baptism we claimed our part in Christ’s death and died to the world only to be reborn as children of the living God. This is the death of flesh that Paul writes about in our reading from Romans.

We are dead—and thus we have a part in Christ’s resurrection, the eternal life promised to all who proclaim Jesus Christ as lord. This is the paradox of Christian life: to conquer death, you only have to die. And every day when we resist the temptations of this world and set our minds more firmly upon God’s promise of life in the spirit, we continue to die to the world in order to live in Christ.

Any honest evaluation of our daily lives will show us just how often we fall short of this call to spiritual perfection. But we can find reason enough to hope in the words of Thomas—flawed, doubting Thomas!--“Let us go, that we may die with him.” A flawed boast from a flawed man, and yet immortalized and perfected through the saving resurrection of Jesus Christ. Tradition tells us that Thomas would indeed “die with him,” many years later and far from home in India, spreading the Gospel to people and places this humble peasant from Galilee had never imagined.

This death of the flesh does not mean death to all human desires or ascension to some higher plane of spiritual enlightenment. Jesus shows us the full, blessed embodiment of human emotion as he weeps at Lazarus’s tomb. And our earthly desires—the desire to love and be loved, the desire to make the world a better place, and the desire to live our lives the fullness we are called to—when properly ordered reflect the divine will at work in our creation and conception.

To die to the flesh is to renounce the spiritual forces in this world that rebel against God and seek to corrupt and destroy creation. And life in the spirit is to acknowledge Jesus Christ as our risen lord and to share in the promise of new life through the Lord's resurrection.

It is important to remember that today's Gospel reading is the "raising of Lazarus" and not the "Resurrection of Lazarus." Lazarus will die again - Death remains a part of our world, a fact of life that we must confront until Jesus comes again and all things are made new. But through the raising of Lazarus we have a foretaste of the Resurrection of Easter, in which Jesus will shatter the power of death and open wide the gates of heaven.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus tells Martha. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We repeat these words at every funeral for our deceased brothers and sisters, a testament of faith in their spiritual life and their share in the resurrection of Christ.

To share in that resurrection is not to escape the travails of human life, but to accept them, embrace them, and seek to use them to further the kingdom of God. "Let us go, that we may die with him," we say as we begin each new day determined to live as disciples of Christ, missionaries to a world in desperate need of the Good News.

For every soul saved is the world saved all over, and for each one of us freed from the power of sin and death Jesus cries out as he did with Lazarus, "Unbind them and let them go."

Reflect on what you have learned about God and about yourselves this Lenten season. Next week brings us to Jerusalem, to that triumphal entry upon the back of a donkey and the cosmic drama that waits in that holy city.