

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XIV

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

I. The miracle for the raising of Lazarus brings the signs to their height and prepares the way for the passion and death of Christ.

A. The raising of the dead, especially after four days, was the most dramatic miracle, one that neither the crowds, nor Lazarus' sisters even thought to ask for.

- The closest parallels in the Old Testaments are the raising of dead youths by Elijah and Elisha, the raising of one unnamed prophet by another, and the raising of a dead man who was thrown onto the bones of Elisha. However, in those cases, it appears the people had not been dead so long. See 1 Kings 13:23-32;17:17-24, 2 Kings 4:18-37, 14:21.

- Jewish theology indicated that the soul would remain near the body for three days, and Jewish funerals to this day must be performed within three days. Thus, this miracle would be considered particularly astounding, the calling of a soul back.

B. This miracle is the seventh sign, the sign that gives a sense of completion to the fulfillment of the order, which was represented by the seven days of creation. Furthermore, the Hebrew term for swearing an oath was literally translated "to seven oneself," implying an idea of giving the whole of oneself.

C. This miracle is still of the old order before the Paschal Mystery, for it simply restores life. It does not give the new life that Christ won after the Resurrection, for Lazarus is still threatened as Jesus Himself is. Nevertheless it does show divine power to reverse the curses that befell because of the Fall.

D. There is a deep irony in the fact that Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead leads to the plotting by the Sanhedrin for His own death, as well as that of Lazarus. There is a dramatic contrast between the forces of life and death, reflecting the two ways set forth to the Chosen People by Moses. Deut. 30:15-30; see also Jer. 21:8; Matt. 7:13-14, 24-27.

E. The Synoptic Gospels do not describe this miracle, nor describe this particular Lazarus, but they do say that Jesus raised the dead. See Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43, Luke 7:11-17, 22, 8:40-56. And, ironically at the end of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Moses tells the rich man that, if one will not abide by the teachings of Moses and the prophets, he will not believe

even if one should rise from the dead. Luke 16:31.

- Because the other Gospels say that Jesus had raised the dead during the early time of His public ministry, and because the people here do not seem to think He can do this, this event may have occurred earlier and is put here by John because of its theological significance as the highest of the miracles. In addition, at the end, John says that the Sanhedrin officials began plotting His death, although there has been a conspiracy reported as early as chapter 5, which describes events a year earlier. On the other hand, the earlier resurrection miracles occurred in Galilee and right after death; the people in Jerusalem may not have heard about them or may have thought of them more as a miracle along the lines of the miracles that Elijah and Elisha performed. In addition, the plots to kill Jesus earlier may not have been organized by the Sanhedrin.

II. The scene begins with Jesus across the Jordan, staying away from those plotting against Him in Jerusalem.

A. The messenger from Mary and Martha says that Lazarus is very ill.

- Mary is identified as the one who anointed Jesus. This phrasing is curious because she will anoint Jesus near the beginning of Holy Week, as John will describe in the next chapter. There are several possible solutions. First, John may be mentioning it here to set up anticipation later, connecting the two events of Jesus raising Lazarus and being anointed for His own death. Or John may have not worried about when she would anoint Jesus, and simply been referring to a well known event. Third, it is possible that Mary the sister of Lazarus is also the sinful woman (possibly Mary Magdalen) who anointed Jesus earlier, as described in Luke 7:37-38.

B. Jesus knows the purpose of the death, the glorification of God through His Son. Jesus' statement to this effect has a double meaning. First, the miracle itself will show forth Jesus' saving power. Second, the miracle will be part of the chain of events leading to His death and therefore His glorious resurrection.

C. Jesus' statement that the illness will not end in death likewise has a double meaning. First, there will be death, but it will not be the end of the story. Second, as Jesus comments on sleeping will later indicate, physical death alone is never true final death. See Mark 5:39.

D. The narrative says that Jesus stayed behind two more days precisely because He loved Lazarus and his sisters.

- One reason He stayed behind may be that, because the miracle was four days after the death, it was all the more glorious and therefore would inspire even more faith.
- Also, although the full mourning process was seven days, the four days allowed a sense of finality to the death, which may have been helpful to Mary and Martha.

E. When Jesus proposes going to Bethany, His disciples understandably are reluctant.

- Jesus then uses the occasion to reintroduce the theme of light and darkness, indicating that, if the light of the world is with one, one need not worry about mistakes. The idea seems to be that, if the Holy Spirit is commanding an action, one who has the light will know he should do it, for he has the light to see within his very self.

F. Jesus then develops the distinction between physical death, described as sleep, and spiritual death. The Old Testament sometimes described death as sleep. See, e.g., 1 Kings 2:10, 11:43. New Testament writers picked up on the theme, this time more plainly understanding the distinction. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:6, 1 Thess. 4:13-15.

- Thomas, who is something of a pessimist, but who has a grim determination to carry out a project, encourages the others to go to what he believes will be their death.

III. When Jesus arrives, He has discourses with Martha and Mary first.

A. These were the same two Mary and Martha about whom Luke writes in describing the complaint of Martha that Mary is not helping with the work. See Luke 10:38-42.

B. Martha, true to form, is up and about and meets Jesus first.

1. She says, in sorrow, disappointment, and perhaps a little reproach for herself and/or Jesus that, if Jesus had been there Lazarus would not have died.

2. She also give Jesus a prayer of abandonment. She may have had some hope that He would raise Lazarus, but did not dare state it in words.

3. When Jesus assures her of her brother's resurrection, she reads it in light of the Old Testament prophesies of a future resurrection. See, e.g., Ezek. 37:1-14; Dan. 12:2; 2 Macc. 7:22-27; Wis. 3:7-12.

4. Jesus announces plainly, not only that He will bring the resurrection, but that He is the resurrection.

- The idea is in part that, precisely because the head of humanity is risen from the dead, the rest of humanity must follow. See 1 Cor. 15:20; 1 Thess. 3:14; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica III question 76 article 1. Thus does St. Paul say that, it is impossible that Christ was raised if the rest of the dead will never be raised. 1 Cor. 15:12-19.

- Thus to receive Christ is to receive a share in risen life even now. See Catechism 994.

- Jesus then uses the two senses of life and death, saying that one who believes may die, but will be raised. However, then He says that one who believes and lives in Him (possibly referring to a soul beyond death) can never die. There is, in any case, a distinction between belief and life, although the latter clearly builds on the former.

5. Martha takes the occasion to affirm her belief in Jesus both as the long awaited Messiah and as the Son of God, coming into the world. See John 1:9 (describing the light coming into the world.)

C Martha then went to call Mary, referring to Jesus as "the teacher."

- It is not clear why Martha used this title. Possibly she did not wish to use a title that implied great powers in the world, such as Christ or Lord, for Jesus at the time did not seem like He was going to show forth power.

- In any case, if this Mary is the same as Mary Magdalen, it is noteworthy that "Rabbouni" or "Teacher" is the first title she uses for Jesus when she sees Him risen again. See John 20:16.

D. Mary then speaks to the Lord the same words that Martha spoke, but here falls at His feet, which is either a sign of great

mourning, a plea for an explanation, or a sign of worship. It is noteworthy that, when Mary was listening to Jesus, she was at His feet. See Luke 10:39.

1. Jesus also seems to be more profoundly moved at the sight of Mary, who seems to understand Him better. For no He is "disturbed in spirit" and even weeps.
2. Jesus' sorrow and disturbance is curious given that He knows He will raise Lazarus in a few moments time.
 - One reason is that He is joining in the sorrow that the family has experienced for the last four days, and by extension with the sorrow of all the bereaved.
 - He may also have remembered other deaths in His family, such as Joseph and John the Baptist. In addition, even that short time of experiencing death is revolting to the one who feels all the effects of sin. The phrase disturbed in spirit implies a certain anger at death.
 - In any case, this passage indicates that Jesus has true, deep human emotions and sanctifies them by connection human feelings to the divine person of the Son.

IV. The raising of Lazarus both indicates Jesus' power, and also shows Him relying on others to do what they can.

A. When Jesus first tells them to remove the stone, Martha understandably objects that the body would already have been decomposing.

- She presumably thought that Jesus simply wanted to visit Lazarus and may have believed He did not know how long ago Lazarus died.
- That she would think about this detail may seem strange at this juncture, but it indicates that the mourning at death does not eliminate her sense of practical concerns.
- Here, for the first time, Jesus calls upon the bystanders to remove the stone. They are meant to do what they can to help, even if it seems relatively minor. Removing the stone could also be a symbol of softening people's hearts so that the Gospel

may take root, a role that the faithful would have until the end of time.

B. Jesus then makes clear that the resurrection should convince all the witnesses that the Father sent Him.

C. Jesus then commands Lazarus to come out, and Lazarus either somehow gets out despite being bound, or is transported by miracle outside the tomb. It is a first promise of what Jesus proclaimed earlier, the dead will hear the voice of the Son and rise from their tombs. John 5:25-29.

- Jesus cries out in a loud voice to perform the miracle. There is an irony here as the crowds will cry out four times in chapters 18 and 19, but that time in seeking Jesus' death.

D. Jesus again gives the bystanders a task and tells them to untie Lazarus and let him free. There is an image of people helping each other overcome the effects of sin that remain after a person is reborn to new life in Christ. St. Augustine states in one of his sermons that this unbinding is a symbol of the sacrament of Reconciliation. See St. Augustine, Homilies on the Gospel of John 49:24.

V. This miracle leads the chief priests and Pharisees, under the high priest Caiphas, to plot Jesus' death.

A. Some go to report the event to the chief priests and Pharisees, possibly believing that it will convert them or possibly because they had given orders to report Jesus to them.

B. Caiphas' father in law Annas should have been the high priest, but the Romans had deposed him and Caiphas took over.

- Caiphas is guided by the Holy Spirit to pronounce the truth even though he himself is corrupt. The implication is that the Holy Spirit can work even in the midst of great injustice.

C. The great irony is that the disaster that the leaders had feared occurred in 70 A.D. and would have been averted had they accepted Jesus. See Luke 19:41-44.