

Living life to the full

It seems a bit strange to have this gospel on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. It seems to be clearly about the resurrection and yet we are still plodding through Lent and have to get through Good Friday before we get to Easter. What's going on; have the Church's liturgical engineers got it all wrong? Can I suggest that this text is more about death than resurrection? After all, Lazarus isn't walking around today; he had to undergo another death. This text is more about our life and death here and now rather than about the resurrection. We will have time enough to consider the resurrection when we get to Easter Sunday and the weeks of celebration afterwards.

In his Spiritual Exercises St Ignatius Loyola suggests that when reading a particular Gospel passage, we should put ourselves in the place of each character in turn and use our imagination to see how we would feel in those circumstances. This can be a most revealing exercise. How about putting myself in the place of Lazarus? I am dead to everything and then I hear a voice: 'Come out, Lazarus.' There I am, lying in a tomb swathed in bandages and surrounded by darkness. If we wonder how we would feel in this situation, the answer would be different for everyone, but I think many might say: Thanks Lord, but I'd prefer to stay where I am.

While attempting to put ourselves imaginatively in Lazarus's place we might become aware of how tomb-like our present way of life is and rekindle a longing for freedom which has perhaps been buried for years. Putting ourselves into the place of a character from scripture can awake all kinds of thoughts within us and lead us to turn to God in prayer with new words on our lips. Yet it is something so simple that we are surprised that we never thought about it ourselves. This Gospel features here in Lent to help us come to live life to the full; for often it is only in the face of death that we are shocked into this realization. This can happen to us in all sorts of ways on the occasion of a loss or bereavement. It is amazing how often it takes overcoming a negative experience to make us realize afresh how much there is that is truly positive and makes life worth living.