

Homily for the Fifth Sunday in Lent 2023 Year A

We are never told in that story how Lazarus himself felt about being summoned back from the dead. There was naturally delight and joy in his sisters, friends and neighbours, but maybe it was not such a great experience for Lazarus himself.

These days there are more and more recorded examples of what scientists are calling, whether that be in the operating theatre or beneath the wheels of a car, “a near death experience”. A person dies clinically, they move out of their body, hover over it, and watch themselves lying there as people try to resuscitate them. They themselves have a tremendous feeling of peace, release, and attachment and, when they are resuscitated, it is with a tremendous feeling of sadness and disappointment that they are drawn back into their bodies.

Others experience a journey through a tunnel towards some beautiful light, and before they reach it, some loved one who has died appears before them and tells them to go back, it is not their time yet, and with great sadness they do so.

Now some may question what it was that these people really experienced. Did they die or was it just a vivid dream, or some chemical reaction in their brains? But the common element that comes out of it all is that to them, it was so vivid and so real that they say they will never again fear the prospect of their death or dying. It is as though their spirit has approached the outer borders of something so new, so delightful that it is only with great sadness that they turn away and cannot wait to one day approach the experience again.

As the years pass by, each one of us has to take more seriously and come to terms with the mystery of death, the death of those we know and love, and of course ultimately our own death. What does it mean to die? What is it like to die and what happens to us after death? I think that Lazarus must have been saddened, if not annoyed, at being called back from the experience of this fullness of life that he had begun to live, but it was done, as Christ said, for the “Glory of God”.

Having experienced the life of fullness, of beauty, and truth it certainly would have put the rest of his earthly life into perspective, with all its ups and downs

and petty limitations. He must have yearned for the time to come round again when he could shake off this mortal coil. But the memory of it would have filled him with hope and confidence. Like all those others who have had near death experiences, they would never ever again fear death or dying.

It is a strange thing to have to say, but the average Christian mourner at the funeral of a loved one is just as heartbroken and devastated as the person who may believe in nothing at all. Our beliefs, understanding, and images of what eternal life means, let us down and fail us in the face of our natural sorrow. It is not our fault that this side of eternity we can only have a limited understanding of what eternal life now means for our loved ones; that we cannot rejoice for them for what they are now experiencing. The mystery of the prospect of my own death fills me with apprehension.

Just as Lazarus had to leave eternal life behind him for a while, so too maybe each one of us must leave behind some of the ideas that we have about eternal life, because they are not helpful and when put to the test they fail us.

Whatever it is like, it is God's wonderful surprise for us. Just as the parent delights in the awe, wonder and happiness in the eyes of a child as it slowly unwraps the long-hidden Christmas presents, so too God must enjoy our delight as we open our eyes in the light of eternity and we see what it holds for us.

My happiness and my utter bliss gives glory to God, and, unlike Lazarus, thank God I will never have to leave it behind, or let go of it again.