Homily for the 5th Sunday in Lent 2026 Year A

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

These days there are more and more recorded examples of what scientists are calling "near death experiences". A person "dies" clinically, whether that be in the operating theatre or, for example, the wreckage of a car; they move out of their body and hover over it; they watch themselves lying there with people trying to resuscitate them. They themselves have a tremendous feeling of peace, release, and detachment, and if 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 a beautiful light, and before they reach it, a loved one, who has died previously, appears before them and tells them to go back, it is not their time yet, and with great sadness they do.

Now we may question what it was that those people really experienced. Did they die? Or was it a vivid dream or just a chemical reaction in the brain?

But the common element which comes out of it all is that to them it was so vivid and so real that they say they will never ever fear the prospect of their death or their 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 they turn back and cannot wait to one day approach the experience again.

As the years pass by each one of us must take more seriously and come to terms with the mystery of death, the deaths 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 very annoyed at being called back from the experience of this fullness of life that he had begun to experience and enjoy.

But it was done, as Christ said, for the Glory of God.

Having experienced this new life of the fullness of beauty and truth, it would certainly have put the rest of his earthly life into perspective, with all of 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 just the memory of it all would have filled him with hope and confidence, and like all those others of near-death experience, they say they would never again fear death or dying.

It is a strange thing to have to say, but the average Christian mourner at a funeral of a loved one is just as heartbroken and devastated as the person who may believe in nothing at all. Our beliefs, our understanding, and our images of what eternal life means, lets us down, and fails 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; we cannot spontaneously rejoice for them for what they are now experiencing, and the mystery of the prospect of our own death fills us with apprehension.

Just as Lazarus had to leave eternal life behind 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 a parent delights in the awe and wonder and happiness in the eyes of a child as it slowly unwraps the long-hidden Christmas present, so too God must be enjoying our delight as we open our eyes in the dazzling light of eternity and see what it holds for us.

Our happiness, our utter bliss gives Glory to God, and, unlike Lazarus, thank God, we will never have to leave it behind, or let go of it again.