

April 10, 2016
St John of the Ladder

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Notable among the friends of Jesus was that family in Bethany, of which St. John wrote, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5). Although Luke told a story account Martha and her sister, Mary (Luke 10:38-42), almost all of what we know of this family comes from the Gospel of John, who places the whole of it in the context of the Lord's Passion.

As John's story of the family opens, Jesus and His companion disciples are in Transjordan, having journeyed there after His enemies made an open attempt on His life in Judea: "Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him" (10:31; cf. 10:39).

During this time in Transjordan, Jesus' friend Lazarus, fell ill, and "the sisters sent to Him, saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick'" (11:3). The sisters desperately wanted Jesus to come (cf. 10:21, 32), but they were reluctant to make the invitation more explicit, conscious of the danger He would face. After some days, without a visit from his Best Friend, their brother Lazarus passed away.

So beloved Lazarus is dead. It is only now, with his friend lying cold in the tomb, that Jesus says to His disciples, "Let us go again to Judea." Remembering their recent danger there, the disciples express dismay at this sudden suggestion: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now (nyn) seeking to stone You, and again You go there?"

When Jesus affirms His resolve to journey south and "awaken" Lazarus from the dead, the disciples sense---and, emphatically, fear---that this will be their final trip to Judea. The danger is imminent and great. In a line of considerable irony, Thomas, the most resigned and stoical of their number, sums up the spirit in which they agree to make the trip: "Let us go too, that we may die with Him."

This is how the evangelist John begins the story of the final week of Jesus' earthly life. Jesus' visit to Judea, undertaken to raise His friend Lazarus from the dead, introduces the closing scenes of the book.

Whereas in the synoptic gospels our Lord's triumphal entry and His purging of the Temple are the deeds that provoke Jesus' enemies to their final plot against His life, in John's account the provocation comes from the resurrection of Lazarus (11:45-54). In this presentation of the drama, the rising of Lazarus requires the dying of Jesus. What our Lord does for the sake of Lazarus and his sisters illustrates a thesis enunciated at the Last Supper: "Greater love than this has no one, that someone should give his life for the sake of his friends" (15:13). His friendship with the brother and sisters in Bethany established the context of the Lord's Passion. He died within the narrative framework of a family crisis. Jesus' death affects this household in a particular and unique way.

Observe how John sets the scene. The story of Lazarus and his sisters---immediately preceded by the figure of the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sake of the sheep (John 10:11, 17-18) and immediately followed by the account of how that life was given---takes its tone and derives its color from the context of the Passion. Jesus, as He approached the tomb of Lazarus, knew

that His own death was the exacted price, the mirabile commercium, for what was about to happen. “He groaned in the spirit,” we are told, “and was disturbed” (11:33). Indeed, a great sadness fell on Him at that moment. “Jesus wept,” wrote John (11:35).

And why did Jesus weep? Those who saw Him believed He cried for the loss of Lazarus: “See,” they said, “how He loved him” (11:36). Because the reader knows, however---as Jesus did!---that Lazarus was about to walk out of that tomb, such an explanation for Jesus’ tears seems a bit strange. Why weep for a dead man at the very brink of his coming to life again?

In fact, this is one of those several gospel texts---perhaps more prominent in John---where the evangelist perceives a deeper meaning in what is said within the narrative. John knew Jesus was not weeping over the death of Lazarus; He was weeping, rather, for “how (pos) He loved him.” That is to say, Jesus had in mind at that moment, not the death of Lazarus, but His own death—“how He loved him.” This scene of Jesus’ tears comes close to the beginning of Matthew’s account of the Lord’s agony: “He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death’” (26:37-38).

If anyone was aware of what Jesus’ visit to Bethany truly meant, I argue it was Lazarus’s sister, Mary. The next chapter describes how, when Jesus was at table, she, “taking a measure (litran!) of myrrh---a balsam extract, quite expensive---anointed the feet of Jesus” (12:3).

It is important to observe closely the way Jesus explains what Mary is doing here. He says, “Leave her be, for she kept this (teresei avto) for the day of My burial” (12:7). What does He mean, “She kept this”? It means she had preserved it; she had held it back. When Lazarus was anointed for burial four days earlier, Mary had refrained from using this costly unguent on the dead body of her brother. Even as the family buried Lazarus, Mary of Bethany sensed that the Savior would be coming soon and would be in need of this ointment for His own burial. She perceived in her spirit what would presently transpire, and Jesus, when she entered the room, understood exactly what her plan had been all along.