

6 April

Today's Gospel makes it abundantly clear that a great bond of friendship existed between Jesus and Lazarus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill'. The Gospel makes clear that Jesus feels great distress, he is moved with a sigh that comes straight from the heart. Jesus feels great compassion in exactly the same way we are moved when a friend or relative is sick, is suffering or dies. As always, the bible lays before us a profoundly human scenario that each of us can identify with.

But in the face of such suffering and distress, God is at work transforming this raw human emotion into something glorious and hope-filled. The death of Lazarus is not the end of the story; death is not the final word; the final word is the powerful word of Jesus who turns to the Father in prayer, the God who hears the cry of his people. Lazarus is raised up. Jesus calls him out from death and Lazarus is set free. It prefigures what will happen to Jesus on Easter Sunday, that his death on Good Friday appears as the end of the story; yet God in his power will transform this death in order for Jesus to live forever and give each of us the hope and promise of eternal life.

I remember years ago hearing the story of the late Kerry Packer who collapsed of heart failure but was revived. In a generous spirit, he made a substantial donation for life-saving medical equipment to be readily available to others that helped to save him. On the experience of being near-death he stated, 'I've been to the other side and there is nothing there'. While I respect Kerry Packer's opinion, for Christians we believe that there is something on the other side. Death is not the final curtain-call. As painful and real as it is, death for us is a transition into the great promise of the resurrection, the hope, joy and light of Jesus the risen Lord. The journey of Jesus to Jerusalem is towards a dramatic encounter with his passion and death; but this passion and death is transformed by God into something new.

Lazarus, the dead man, is the sign of hope – 'Unbind him and let him go free'. On Easter Sunday, Jesus will be unbound as well and he will be free. His death and resurrection conquers death forever and sets us free. That's why the Church has this long season and elaborate ceremonies ... that long journey of the passion, the death, the suffering

of Jesus all leading to this wonderful proclamation that on Easter Sunday he is risen and that death has been conquered forever. God transforms this death into something hope-filled and joy-filled that likewise transforms our lives. Everyone with Jesus, Martha and Mary saw nothing but sadness in the death of Lazarus. For Jesus, this death is really an entry-point into a story of life, faith and joy.

The greatest challenge for us Christians is to proclaim hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness and new life in the midst of death. The other challenge is to be faithful to a life of prayer. Mary and Martha doubted the power of Jesus so great was their grief at the death of Lazarus. But Jesus calls them to faith, to trust and to hope. Today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Lord who gives us life by putting his spirit into us. New life was given to Lazarus and anew spirit of faith was given to Martha and Mary. As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, may these gifts be given to us today.