

Lenten Journey 5



Raising of Lazarus by Giotto

What is the importance of this Sunday and why did it used to be called Passion Sunday?

The fifth Sunday of Lent used to be called Passion Sunday – now this tends to be used for Palm Sunday – because it marked the two weeks leading to Easter when we now focus exclusively on Our Lord's passion. In the Divine Office one is still permitted to use the Liturgical hymns for Holy Week. So we are now entering into this solemn period of the Church's Liturgical year.

What marks out Passion Sunday?

In contrast with Laetare Sunday with its flowers, organ, rose vestments and a joyful presence, the Church begins its period of the commemoration of Our Lord's passion with the cross, statues of Our Lady and the saints being veiled in purple. Although, often this is not done in Churches – or it is carried out on Palm Sunday – this is an excellent practice and one that can be followed in our homes. Why? Because our attention now must be focused on Our Lord. The malice of his enemies grows and they plot his death. We must commiserate during this time with Jesus. This is not a time for joy and festivities but grief.

What is the main theme of today's mass and what is its significance?

The gospel account of the raising of Lazarus dominates this Sunday. But to understand its significance we must first take a step back. Three themes dominate Lent and all the Liturgical readings must be seen in their light: Firstly the passion of Our Lord; secondly, the preparations of the catechumens who will receive baptism at the Easter Vigil and thirdly, the reconciliation of sinners to the Church – in olden days public penitents were readmitted to Church on Maundy Thursday. (This last is not so common but is very important, since we shall be renewing our baptismal vows cleansed of sin.) These are all connected for it is our Lord's death on the cross that gives new life to those being baptised and brings forgiveness of sin. Hence, the bodily resurrection of Lazarus prefigures our spiritual rebirth at Easter – the mystery was accomplished once and for all when our Lord gave up his life on the cross and rose from the dead; but that same mystery we are about to live through and participate in it again – really and truly. Those being baptised at the Easter Vigil are going to receive new life, a baptism into Our Lord's death and resurrection. But we also are going to renew our baptismal vows.

What is the pattern of the gospels leading up to Easter?

Holy Mother Church teaches us through the Liturgy which is the fount of all wisdom and from which we draw our lives. We have had three readings from John: The Samaritan woman by the well (chp 4), the cure of the man born blind (Chp 9) and now the raising of Lazarus (chp 11). We know from ancient liturgical texts that these were placed on these particular Sundays. Why? They relate to the examination of the candidates for baptism, termed "Scrutinies" which take place on these Sundays. These gospels contain the essence of the faith.

The Samaritan woman points the catechumens – incidentally this word simply means one instructed – to the Messiah who is going to pour out the "living water"; hence, she is the model for those who wish to learn more and who wish to proclaim Jesus the messiah. The episode of the Blind Man shows their journey of faith that they must follow and that they must confess Jesus as Lord whatever that may cost and by doing so publically in baptism they enter into a solemn covenant. Finally, the resurrection of Lazarus is rich in meaning: we see the growth in faith of Martha and Mary - Martha proclaims him to be the Christ, the one who was to come into the world." Mary acknowledges that if he had been present her brother would not have died. But most importantly, the resurrection clearly points to the resurrection of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live."

What is the dramatic import of the raising of Lazarus from the dead in Our Lord's life?

We see a sadness in Our Lord – He is deeply disturbed, he is in great distress. Why? Partly human sorrow for Lazarus; partly, sadness at the lack of faith of those around him but Jesus also recognises that this his greatest and most clearly demonstrated miracle will not be enough for some – they are now set upon his death and also the death of Lazarus; for this miracle had been witnessed by many and brought about their conversions. But Jesus also knew what was in men's hearts and what he was about to suffer and this episode ushers in the greatest of all dramas.

An aside: the importance of praying these scriptures and following the liturgical texts.

Throughout these Lenten letters, we have emphasised that by reading and re-reading the scriptures we come to see the face of Jesus and the Holy Spirit enlightens our hearts. Pope Benedict comments: "This encounter with the divine Word must lead to a profound change of life, to a radical identification with the

Lord and his Gospel, to become fully aware that it is necessary to be solidly cemented in Christ, acknowledging that 'one does not begin to be Christian because of an ethical decision or a great idea, but because of the encounter with an event, with a Person, who gives a new horizon to life and, with it, a decisive orientation'" ("Deus Caritas Est," No. 1). So all we need to do in the next two weeks is follow what the Church puts before her in the mass and solemn liturgical ceremonies....but prayerfully.

How is our preparation for the Paschal mystery going? Are we spiritually well prepared? We still have time – now is the time of grace if we but ask.

1. Have we prepared for the renewal of our baptismal vows by a good and thorough confession and from reflecting on the love of Christ in giving us this great sacrament?
2. Have we spent time with Our Lord, following him on this great journey which cost him?
3. Do we have faith in the resurrection, that following Christ even though it leads through the cross, brings us to the glory of the resurrection? We must convince ourselves of this truth.
4. Do we pray for the dead? We must pray for the souls of the faithful departed.
5. Some interesting Scripture passages to read in this context: most importantly to understand baptism and Jesus' passion: Romans 6:3-4. We must have faith in the resurrection: Meditate on Genesis 22:1-18. (Abraham must surely have believed that God would bring Isaac back to life?) Lest we are put off by the cross: First Letter of St. Peter 4:12-16; to give us confidence: Hebrews 4:14-16 (here the Church sees Mary as the way to approach the throne of Grace.) VIP: Revelation 3:19-22 (Eucharistic)

God bless and may He speed us on our way to Glory by conforming us to his son's passion,



Father Dominic O'Connor