

Gospel text

John 11: 1-45

1 There was a sick man, Lazarus of Bethany, from the same village as his sisters Mary and Martha. 2 It was this Mary who anointed the Lord with myrrh and wiped her feet with her hair, and her brother was sick. 3 The sisters sent him this message, "Lord, the one you love is sick". 4 Hearing this Jesus answered, "This disease does not cause death, but aims to reveal the extraordinary quality of God's being, so that through it you see the extraordinary quality of God's son being. 5 Jesus loved Martha and her sister and as well her brother Lazarus. 6 When Jesus heard about his illness, he stayed where he was for two days. 7 Then after that he said to his disciples, "Let us go again to Judea". 8 They replied, "Master, when the Jews are trying to stone you, do you want to go there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are not the days twelve hours long? If someone walks by day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world. 10 On the other hand, if someone walks in the night, he stumbles because he has no light in him". 11 Having said this, he then said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him up." 12 His disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be fine". 13 Jesus had in fact spoken of his death. But they believed he was talking about sleep drowsiness. 14 Then Jesus said clearly to them, "Lazarus is dead. 15 I rejoice for you not to have been there, in order to lead you to faith. Now let's go to him". 16 Then Thomas, called the Twin, said to his companions, "Let us also go to die with him".

17 After he left, Jesus found him when he had been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany is located near Jerusalem, about two miles. 19 Many Jews came to Martha and Mary's house to support them in mourning for their brother. 20 Now Martha, when she heard of the coming of Jesus, went to meet him. Mary, for her part, was sitting at home. 21 Martha spoke to Jesus, saying, "Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died. 22 Now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give it to you". 23 Jesus answered her, "Your brother will rise again". 24 Martha continued, "I know that he will rise again at the resurrection on last days". 25 Jesus said to her, "I am both the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live. 26 And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She replied, "Yes, Lord. I always believed that you are the messiah, the son of God, the one who comes into the world".

28 Then, having said this, she went to discreetly call Mary her sister, saying to her, "The master is there and demands you". 29 Hearing this, she immediately got up and started walking towards him. 30 Jesus had not yet arrived in the village, but was still at the place where Martha went to meet him. 31 Now the Jews who were with her in the house to support her, seeing Mary suddenly get up and go out, followed her, imagining that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she threw herself at his feet, saying, "If you had been there, my brother would not have died". 33 Seeing her crying like the Jews accompanying her, Jesus was angry and was internally troubled. 34 Then he asked, "Where did you drop him off?" They replied, "Lord, come and see". 35 Jesus wept. 36 Some Jews began to say, "See how he loved him". 37 But others said, "He who opened the eyes of the blind man, was he not able to make sure that he did not die?"

38 Again, wrathful inwardly, Jesus goes to the tomb. There was a cave, and a stone placed on it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone". Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to him, "Lord, he smells already, because it's been four days". 40 Jesus replied, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the extraordinary quality of God's being?" 41 So the stone was removed. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I am grateful to you for listening to me. 42 I know you always listen to me, but I spoke for the crowd all around, so that they believe you sent me". 43 After saying this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come here, outside!" 44 The dead man came out, feet and hands tied with strips, and his face wrapped very tightly with a shroud. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go".

45 So many of the Jews who went to Mary's house and saw what he had done believed in him.

Gospel commentary - Homily

What is living? What is dying?

Eleanor is very religious. Whenever a priest comes to celebrate mass, she goes to the chapel of the senior's house where she lives. Prayers, she has done a lot in her life, because so many times she felt answered. But that did not stop her from experiencing great disappointments. She prayed so much when her daughter-in-law suffered from cancer, only to see her die at the age of 36. She prayed so much when the household of her son and three children collapsed, that she eventually had to accept the inevitable divorce. She prayed so much for one of her daughters when she learned of her severe diabetes, and a few years later, of her breast cancer, with which she is still struggling. She prayed so much for her husband who died in palliative care after several years of suffering. She had probably imagined a peaceful old age surrounded by her children, but these are scattered around the world, and here she is now in a senior's home, in the midst of strangers whom she must get to know. And she is bored, she experiences existential anguish and the vertigo of approaching death.

Eleanor's story reflects the experience of many. And it can offer us a gateway to the difficult story of the Gospel according to John, called: The raising of Lazarus. According to most biblical scholars, this story went through several edits before ending up in the hands of the final Gospel writer. Originally, it was probably a simple miracle story with only Lazarus and Mary as characters and where Jesus healed a man suffering from a fatal disease, a healing perceived from the start as a victory over death. Note here that we are talking about resuscitation and not resurrection: Lazarus will have to die again, a little later. But John developed this account in a masterful catechesis by adding the central character of Martha, and where are presented the main themes of his theology: faith, sickness and death as an opportunity for God to manifest his glory through Jesus, the life and resurrection as being related to faith in Jesus. The result is a small masterpiece of composition. But a masterpiece does not

remove our difficulty: what is this death which manifests the glory of God? What is to resuscitate? What is life in fullness? What does it mean to believe?

Let's start with a first question linked to a comment from both Martha and Mary: "Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died". The two women accuse Jesus of having been absent. Even the narrator of the story says explicitly: "When Jesus heard about his illness, he stayed where he was for two days". In other words, Jesus wanted to be absent. This absence easily evokes our experience. Of course, we can see the absence of God, which is in fact our daily reality. But it is also all that we lack, all that we would have liked to see happen, and that did not happen. It is partly the mirror of Eleanor's life. These are all our emptiness, our existential anguish, when we accept the silence around us and in us, when we do not try to hide it by noise and activism, to flee it by taking refuge in the past or in the future. Jesus' response to this situation is confusing and raises questions: this situation does not cause death, but aims to manifest what he calls the "glory of God", an expression which I prefer to translate by "the extraordinary quality of God's being". What does this all mean?

One cannot solve this riddle without examining the very life of Jesus. We know practically nothing about his personal life, except that when he began his public ministry, which lasted just over two years, he already lost his father, Joseph. But the mission he set himself to bring people to open up to this reign of God is almost a failure. In our story, he is about to be arrested and executed. Thomas may say that the disciples will die with him, but Jesus will be alone. Why did God not answer all his prayers, if he is truly the darling child of God, as the story of his baptism tells. What then is this God, at the source of this world of absence, suffering and death? We are hitting a wall here, unless we accept in faith that this Jesus, who drank the cup of the vagaries of our life to the dregs, had now entered into life in fullness of the resurrection. Anyone who opens up to this world in all its depth, who accepts the bite of his absences and the existential anguish that it arouses, will experience the extraordinary quality of God's being, following Jesus.

Do we have here an explanation of suffering and death? Absolutely not. All of this remains a mystery. Will this enlighten Eleanor? I do not know. If it were otherwise, we would not speak of faith. But it is faith that it is here, precisely. We indicate a direction to follow to find life, without having evidence, but a simple testimony. And this life in fullness remains a mystery, since we do not know exactly what it is. In a way, John is telling us: come and see. Are we ready to take this unknown path to the end, and to believe?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, January 2011