

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)**

### **The Raising of Lazarus**

#### **St. Agnes Cathedral**

#### **Homily of Most Reverend John O. Barres**

**March 29, 2020**

**“I am the Resurrection and the Life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

**The story of the Raising of Lazarus from the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of John streams through our hearts, minds and souls, and streams through the universal Church on this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent as we continue to experience the tragedies, trauma, unemployment, and the financial and economic distress of the COVID-19 crisis.**

**The image on Friday afternoon of our Holy Father Pope Francis in a vacant and deserted St. Peter’s Square praying with and for the world and then his blessing of the city of Rome and the entire world with the Blessed Sacrament was a particularly poignant and hopeful moment of global solidarity.**

**We remember in a special way on this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent the souls of those who have died from the corona virus and their families, and those who, as Pope Francis says, are “writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, deacons, religious men and women and so very many others.” We remember our families and the efforts of each of us to care for our families and our neighbors.**

**The Gospel of John is known for its Seven Signs or miracles. The Raising of Lazarus from the tomb is the Sixth of the Seven Signs.**

**Let’s take a moment to review the other Signs and their role in the Gospel so that we can understand the Raising of Lazarus in its proper context.**

**The First Sign is the changing of Water into Wine at the Wedding Feast of Cana in John Chapter 2. This Sign has Eucharistic overtones. It affirms Christ's power and presence and Our Lady's intercession for married couples. A psychologist was quoted in the New York Times yesterday that the COVID-19 Stay at Home reality has "engendered a new togetherness for some while amplifying friction and conflict to others." The psychologist said "It's like putting all our issues into a frying pan and really heating them up." As Catholics, we ask that our marriage and family lives in these Stay at Home times may be heated up with the purifying Fire of the Holy Spirit which makes us humble Good Samaritans, patient, and merciful with each other's faults and frailties at close range. We go to Our Lady to intercede for our families, and especially the elderly and the sick in our families, and we remember what Mary tells the wine steward and all of us through Salvation History: "Do whatever my Son tells you to do."**

**The Second Sign is the Healing of the Official's Son in John Chapter 4. The official makes the healing request of Jesus and by Jesus' words his son is healed from a distance. The official comes to believe in the word of Jesus and its saving power. We are called like the official to have an ever-growing and bolder faith.**

**The Third Sign is the Healing of the Paralytic at Bethesda in John Chapter 5. While there is a healing from physical paralysis, we are reminded that the Lord Jesus wants to heal us from the soul-stunting paralysis of sin and fear. He wants our wills not to be paralyzed in these COVID-19 times but to be strong in his will, his power, his peace and his love.**

**The Fourth Sign is the Multiplication of Loaves and the Feeding of the 5,000 in John 5. The Multiplication of Loaves reaches back to the Old Testament and the Manna from Heaven that fed the Israelites in the desert but it also looks forward to and foreshadows the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and the Seventh Sign of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross.**

**The Fifth Sign is the Healing of the Man Born Blind in John Chapter 9 which we explored last Sunday on the Fourth Sunday of Lent (A). Jesus touches our eyes and the many dimensions of sinful blindness that keep us in darkness.**

**Baptism liberates us from sin. Jesus touches our eyes so that we can see not with the X-ray vision of a Marvel Comic Superman but a vision that is far more powerful – supernatural vision and an understanding of the invisible truths and biblical realities that lead us to Eternal Life.**

**The Sixth Sign is the Raising of Lazarus from John Chapter 11 which is our focus on this Fifth Sunday of Lent (A).**

**Finally, the Seventh Sign is the Death and Resurrection of Jesus in John Chapters 19 and 20. All the previous Six Signs embroider and direct the narrative of the Gospel of John to the Seventh Sign. These Six Signs create a momentum in the narrative and a holy expectation of God’s glory being manifested in the Seventh and Ultimate Sign of Christ’s Death and Resurrection.<sup>1</sup>**

**Having seen the flow and interrelationships of the Seven Signs of John’s Gospel, now let’s go back to the Sixth Sign captured in today’s Gospel reading, the Raising of Lazarus from the Tomb, and analyze its significance in more detail.**

**The Raising of Lazarus from the Tomb in John 11 is unique to John’s Gospel. It is a detailed and intricate Gospel narrative with characteristic Johannine themes of irony, misunderstanding and subsequent enlightenment, and plot and character development.**

**While the Mystery of the Transfiguration of Jesus which is in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke reveals the Glory of Jesus’ Divinity, the Raising of Lazarus unique to the Gospel of John reveals both Jesus’ glorious humanity and Jesus’ glorious divinity as it is said in the narrative very simply and directly, “Jesus wept.”**

**Jesus’ moment of prayerful unity with the Father prepares him to cry out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”**

<sup>1</sup> I draw on my analysis of the Seven Signs from Steubenville University biblical scholar Dr. John Bergsma’s analysis on his *The Sacred Page* website for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (A). I recommend all of Bergsma’s fine books and CDs as well as his co-authored (with Dr. Brant Pitre) and ground-breaking *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: Volume 1, The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018).

**As Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth from the Tomb after four days in his burial clothes, there are two levels of meaning.**

**The first is that Jesus “is the Resurrection and the Life.” Lazarus coming forth and being unbound by his burial clothes foreshadows the burial cloth used to bury Jesus and his shedding of that burial cloth as he bursts forth in Resurrected Glory from the Empty Tomb.**

**Just as he raises Lazarus from the dead back to physical breathing life, so too Jesus raises us, through his coming Death and Resurrection, to Eternal Life and eternal unimaginable happiness and ecstasy.**

**“I am the Resurrection and the Life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

**The second meaning is that Lazarus who is bound by his constricting burial clothes is bound by sin. Jesus says, “Untie him and let him go.”**

**St. Augustine interprets this Sixth Sign as a story of the Sacrament of Penance which releases and frees us from the enslaving constrictions and paralysis of sin. Jesus raises us from the darkness of sin to the liberating light of mercy, forgiveness and holiness.**

**On this Fifth Sunday of Lent (A), we already begin to look forward next week to moving from the Sixth Sign of the Raising of Lazarus to the Seventh Sign – the Death and Resurrection, the Paschal Mystery of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We look forward to Holy Week and Palm Sunday next weekend.**

**While we are all in pain that our Holy Week 2020 needs to be a virtual Holy Week, we do have a Pastoral Letter, *The Great Week: A Pilgrimage with the Lord in Holy Week* which can help strengthen, lift and inspire our virtual Holy Week celebrations.**

**This Pastoral Letter is a user-friendly, easily understandable synthesis of Holy Week and the Sacred Triduum. The Pastoral Letter’s analysis of liturgical theology, spirituality and history is designed to show the relationship between the Sacred Liturgies of Holy Week and Catholic Evangelization.**

**I encourage everyone to participate in all the Holy Week liturgies virtually through the Catholic Faith Network (see: [catholicfaithnetwork.org](http://catholicfaithnetwork.org) for details) and through your own parishes streaming the liturgies.**

**Let's take this unique and virtual evangelization opportunity to pray that the Holy Spirit might ignite a massive return of Catholic Long Islanders to a full, active and conscious participation in our Holy Week liturgies and our Sunday Masses throughout the year.**

**I encourage you all to read and pray our Pastoral Letter which is available on our diocesan website DRVC.org and in the March 2020 *Long Island Catholic* magazine that many of you receive at home.**

**I also had the opportunity this past Friday, March 27, 2020, to share the Pastoral Letter with every American Bishop in the United States for possible use in their dioceses as they celebrate virtual Holy Weeks around the country.**

**I received an email late Friday night from the Bishop of Fairbanks, Alaska. He thanked the Diocese of Rockville Centre for sharing the Holy Week Pastoral Letter with the people of Fairbanks, Alaska and said: "We have 37 remote parishes of Native Alaskans, pretty much on 'lock down' that could benefit enormously from the Pastoral Letter."**

**Catholic Long Islanders stand in evangelizing solidarity with Catholic Alaskans!**

**This is just another example of the global Catholic solidarity that our Holy Father Pope Francis models for us and calls us to. God bless you all!**