

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

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JESUS CALLS US TO RISE TO A NEW LIFE

A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller

We hear this Sunday about Lazarus returning from the dead but the focus of the story is not Lazarus but Jesus. *“I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will come to life and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.”* The Gospel isn’t talking about what we believe but about our religious experience! Being brought back from death isn’t a miracle out there; it is a transformation that takes place within us. Yes, resurrection will fill us with life completely but it begins when the Spirit of Jesus comes to dwell within us—and not within us simply as individuals but within us as a single family.

St. Paul declared, *“if Christ hasn’t been raised our preaching is void of content and your faith too is empty”*. Paul is introducing us to a theological discussion but reminding us that Jesus lives in us and seeks to change our lives right now. That’s why he added to the quote above the words, *“The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the death dwells in you”*. The spirit stirs up tension and joys, it inspires us to exceptional deeds of love, patience and chastity; it crucifies the worldly in us. We may think we’re losing every-thing but we simultaneously experience an intense inner power that we know is the Spirit. It’s raising us to a new and fuller life.

What if the Spirit has led us to give up the quest for power, wealth, prestige, and personal satisfactions? Does this mean the opportunity for a good life is gone? Did we pray not to have to give all this up? Did we pray that our life wouldn’t collapse and leave us with nothing? But Jesus didn’t answer; he let everything in our former life collapse. Despite the disappointment did you, with Martha and Mary, go to Jesus when he called to you? They still believed in Jesus’ power to transform their lives and they saw him weep with them over their loss, because it was his too.

They followed Jesus even to the tomb and obeyed when he said *“Remove the stone!”* Are we strong enough in faith to roll away the stone of forgetfulness we have tried to use to seal up remembrance of our disappointments and all that has collapsed in our lives? If so, we are going to be called to make new decisions because we believe in the power of Jesus! We won’t be overwhelmed by tensions and struggles; they will be over-whelmed by the Spirit within us.

This is what Jesus means when he declares to us: *“I am the resurrection and the life”*! Suppose we die in the service of our neighbor. They will see this new strength and will be called to enter into it with us. What actually collapsed may have been false hopes, a false self, or narrow-mindedness. Now we have to grasp the new life in fidelity to Jesus and to all our brothers and sisters in Jesus. We live in a community of love and it can never die because it is always rising with Jesus.

KEEPING OUR HEARTS FIXED ON GIVING

A reflection by Fr. Romano Guardini

Have you ever reflected on what the Gospels say about Jesus' attitude toward death and every sort of personal loss? He takes death and loss seriously and he feels pain in them just as the rest of us do, and yet he is "free" in a way that calls for reflection. Jesus wasn't a hero who looked only at triumph and not the trials through which it is gained. His wasn't the freedom of a detached sage who sees death as taking away only what is of small value and stand firm in the face of it. Jesus knows that he, and so all of us, are "independent" of death. Death and all the loss that goes with it have no claim on Jesus, and the reason is that he is filled with a life that depends only on God.

Jesus submits to death, as we all must, but he also changes death itself. It isn't fundamentally loss anymore. It is the fullest possible human path to life with God. How Jesus treats death can be seen in the three stories about the people he brought back from death. At the gates of Naim he met a widow accompanying the body of her only son. He restores the son to life by a simple word. When he calls back the daughter of Jairus he tells them to think of it as though she had been asleep. And there is the event described by John—the raising of Lazarus.

Listen to Jesus' words: "*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will live even if dead.*". Jesus and no other is resurrection and life. Everything depends on having within us the "I am" that Jesus spoke. He says this to identify himself with God. Having God within us is having life and in a way that no one and nothing can take it away. Do you believe this? The question put to Lazarus' sister might be put to us. We fear death in the measure that we are identified with "I am". If who and what we are is at the deepest level one with God then there is nothing to fear. Death is just passing from one way of living to another, and indeed to a fuller way of living.

Our death isn't unrelated to who we are and what our life is but the direct consequence of the way we choose to live—as Genesis says of the death of our first parents. We can only fully identify with God by giving ourselves into God's hands irretrievably—in a way that makes it impossible to take the gift back and live our lives in our own and not God's way. Jesus never took anything about his humanity out of God's hands in the first place. He was born of Mary's gift of self to God and he entered human life and grew to its maturity in that gift. He was a gift to the Heavenly Father and nothing about death could change that, as we see by his way of dying on the Cross.

A human person who has given the gift of self to Christ has given it to God. That makes death only one more way of making that gift. Death isn't any longer a loss but an opportunity to complete what one has begun, and do it in a way that allows no backsliding! A human person linked in faith to Jesus Christ is linked to his dying and living as ways of giving oneself into the hands of Love. Listen to Jesus: "*Amen! Amen! I tell you that whoever believes in my word and believes in the One who sent me, has everlasting life and doesn't come to judgment. That person has passed from death to life!*" It is really that simple. It is no more than a matter of giving, and of giving the one gift that most counts—giving oneself.

RECOGNIZING OUR REAL PROBLEM

A reflection by Fr. Carroll StuhlmueLLer

It has seemed puzzling to many that our ancestors in faith viewed the story of the bronze serpent as symbolizing Christ and his redemptive work. We will understand if we keep it in mind that the truly basic problem we have to deal with is sin. Life isn't a series of economic or social challenges or even those that come from difficult personal relationships. We have sinned. How we relate to that depends on how we think of sin. Our forebears in faith thought of it as being bitten by a poisonous serpent, the devil. How is one to deal with a case of devil-bite poisoning? We turn to Jesus, just as Israelites turned to the bronze serpent Moses had made. Looking at the serpent didn't heal the bite but ensured that one would survive it. Looking to Jesus doesn't take away the distress or even pain of our struggle with sin but ensures that, in the end, we will be with God.

What is the key to salvation? We have to turn to God for what we need and not to ourselves. Why is this so difficult? Because we have our own ideas about what we truly "need" and they usually aren't the same as God's idea. God really knows what we need, but we don't! Turning to God means accepting one's own inadequacy and lack of wisdom. We don't know what we "need" in order to have life, let alone to have it "abundantly", as Scripture says. So, we look to Jesus and remember, as he reminded the devil during his desert temptations, that life comes from the Word of God. In it God tells us what we need and how to open ourselves to receive it.

We can see how this happens within ourselves if we pause to reflect on our responses to difficult and challenging situations. What do we do first when we think things aren't going as they should? Do we simply redouble our own efforts to get things to work as we believe they should, or do we turn to Jesus? When you hear this is your response that of pointing out that Jesus won't do the things we believe need to be done to "save the situation". Of course, we can't substitute Jesus for our own efforts, but we must remember always that our efforts aren't what save us or anyone else from difficult situations. Only Jesus saves. And this isn't a joke, as some treat it.

It's a matter of not focusing our minds and hearts on the wrong things. What will the result be if we make everything go right? Will it make life what we want it to be? Of course not. We know very well we can't make life good by ourselves, or even with help from others. What we really want is not just to have life run smoothly but to live it in such a way that we come to God. And this is what Jesus does as no one else can. Jesus shows us how to turn to God. If that makes all go well, wonderful. But if it leads us to a cross that too is wonderful. If we carry all the cross-like situations we face relying on Jesus then they will turn out to have been "saving" for us and all concerned. Isn't that what we truly want?

We have all been bitten by the poisonous belief that we can handle things ourselves if we only work hard enough or get the right help, or whatever. This is what leads us to sin. We sin when we turn away from God and rely on ourselves and what Scripture calls "our own devices". Our real problem is the attitude that leads to sin. The antidote is turning to Jesus and the cross instead of ourselves.

DON'T FEAR SHARING CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

A reflection from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

We have begun to follow Christ and we must persevere with patience. St. Paul exhorts us: "Let's run the race that lies ahead of us; keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. He leads us in faith and brings it and us to perfection". Our Lord himself continually taught the same lesson to his disciples. He warned us what that meant for us: "*If your master has been called—Beelzebub—then what will they say about his servants? Pupils are not above their teacher, nor are servants treated better than their master.*" This is why St. Paul tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. This means observing the example of Jesus so that we will know how to follow him.

The Lord himself compares our following him with running in a race. In athletics an instructor teaches students by example as well as words. Our teacher has all the skills we long to acquire and he shows us what we must do to acquire them. In the race that is our life the challenge is to run a straight course and that means keeping Jesus in sight and imitating him. The primary skill we need is faith. Jesus shows how a person with faith behaves under pressure.

What is implied? Christ has given us our faith. We owe the impulses it causes in our hearts to Jesus. He told his disciples: "*You didn't choose me; I chose you!*" If Christ has given us the beginnings of our faith, he will bring it to its perfection. He endured the cross and thought nothing of its shame because he knew the joy that is to be his and ours. You can trust him. "He committed no sin and there is no deceit on his tongue". He had opportunities to avoid the suffering of the cross but he would not do anything except in fidelity to the will of the Heavenly Father. What did the Father will? That he should give us an example to follow!

What does it mean to say that Christ thought the shame that went with crucifixion unimportant? It means he would have us learn to face disgrace boldly. We are to consider it no genuine shame. We can do this because we know what is coming to us and to all who rightly bear the cross. Whenever we ourselves are to bear or suffer some disgrace we are to remember Christ. Remember that his entire life was filled with insults. He was called a madman, a deceiver, a sorcerer, and by the very people among whom he did good!

In all this he revealed the love of the Heavenly Father. But he imitates all he sees the Father do and so he is revealing his love as well. He loves us too much and does so much for us that it would be terrible not to be grateful. We love other people who love us, so certainly we must love Jesus because he has loved us more than all the others. In suffering because you follow Christ you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Do not be afraid!

GOD'S WILL IS THAT WE BE HEALED

A reflection based on St. Augustine's commentary on psalm 85

God could give no greater gift to us than to make his Word, through whom all things were created, our head. God joins us to Christ as members of a body so that the Word might be both God's Son and the son of man. Christ is one God with the Heavenly Father and one man with all of us. As a result, when we pray, we do it with and in Him and when he prays, he does so in and with us. He prays for us and he prays in us and we pray to him as our God.

That means we recognize our own voice in his words and his voice in ours. God did not hesitate to unite himself with us. Listen to the following words: *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God; he was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him nothing was made"*. We are gazing on the divinity of the Son of God as we listen to these words. And yet this God sighs and prays and gives thanks as we do.

Some find it hard to accept that God should come down to such a humble level. Yet there is nothing in Scripture that does not present him as both God, supremely exalted, and as man, supremely humble. In neither sense may we stray from these truths. It means that we are called to pray and keep vigil in faith; we are to keep a vigil of faith. The one whom we contemplate in his nature as God we must also contemplate in his assumed nature as man. He became a servant; he was made to be in the likeness of a human being and lived the life of a human being even to the point of accepting death. He even made his own the psalmist words: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

He did all this to show us that there is nothing about being human which has to separate us from God. If something does cause such a separation it can be taken away. This means it can be healed. Jesus shows us how to walk with him and so find healing. God took upon himself our created nature—what we have become by the way we have lived—in order to change it. He makes us one with himself so we know that this is possible and will actually come to pass. This is what we pray for. Remember then that praying is giving oneself to God. That is the medicine through which healing will come. Pray with all your might, knowing that Christ himself is praying with and in you. As we pray with Christ we are transformed. All that is bad in us is changed so that we are entirely good, just as we were created. Do not be afraid. Trust in the Lord. Never lose faith or cease to hope in Christ!

WHAT FOLLOWING CHRIST INVOLVES

A reflection from Thomas a Kempis' Imitation of Christ

Christ, our Savior, tells us: "One who follows me doesn't walk in darkness for such a one has the light of life". The Lord's words would persuade us to follow his teachings and imitate his way of living. We do this if we genuinely want to be enlightened and be freed from blindness of heart.

From now on let our heart's intent be fixed entirely on the life of Christ. They show us teachings that are more powerful than all the words of the angels and saints. One who receives the grace of having the soul's inner eye opened to the Gospel of Christ finds there a hidden manna.

It often seems that people who hear the Gospels find little sweetness in them. The reason is that they lack the spirit of Christ. That means we must take great pains to conform our lives as nearly as possible to Christ's if we want to have a true understanding of the Gospels.

It isn't profitable to reason about the high and hidden mysteries of the Trinity if one lacks humility. That displeases the Trinity! That indeed is of no profit. A person doesn't become holy by deeply inquisitive reasoning; it is a good life that makes one beloved of God. I would rather feel compunction of heart than know how to define it. If you memorized all the books of the Bible and knew by heart all the wise sayings of the philosophers you would profit not at all if you lacked grace and charity. Everything in the world is empty of profit except loving and serving God alone. This is the most special and noble wisdom that any creature can gain.

It is by devaluing the world in order to draw nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven that is profitable. If you work for worldly riches, even beyond measure, you will find that they quickly perish. The same holds for any unmeasured quest for honor or any pleasure. Why spend your life seeking what you will be punished for after this life ends? How empty a thing it is to desire a long life without taking care that your life be good!

It is foolish to pay attention to the present without providing for the future. Why love what will soon pass away and not preoccupy yourself with everlasting joy? Keep this proverb in your mind: The eye never has enough seeing and isn't pleased with seeing any material thing; nor does the ear have enough of listening. So be intent to stop loving things that are merely visible and turn to those that are invisible. Those who follow only their own desires injure themselves and lose the grace of God.

THE REALITY OF PRAYER

A reflection from Prayer by Fr. Karl Rahner

Every lifting up of the heart in seeking God directly is prayer. The fullness of such prayer is called loving as a Christian. The commandment to love not only achieves the fulfillment of the law but that of prayer. In such prayer a person expresses and gives self over to God. In such prayer a person expresses the highest and best of who one is but does it to the only one who is worthy of being loved with all our strength and without reserve and eternally. If the fullness of prayer is love then we have to talk about loving God if we want to talk about what prayer is.

We often say that love shows itself in keeping the commandments. Yet love is much more than keeping commandments and without love keeping them is useless. What, then, goes on in the human heart when one loves God? We have to talk about this by starting from the human experience of loving selflessly and purely. Passing from human loving to loving God makes that love purer, more selfless, and more unconditional. Love worthy of the name forgets self and clings to the beloved, wants the beloved to be supremely well, and feels blessed when this happens. When one does this God is already present in that love. Another, an entirely different love is coming to light from within their love for each other. When we think of true love, we think of a mysterious pouring out of one human being into another. When this happens one also senses oneself being loved and from higher up! And from such love bloom good deeds, faithful care, and self-sacrificing service. But all this is of God and leads to God.

In such love one can give oneself away without being afraid of deception and of having this love perish. This is an implicit call to God and a flowing out of oneself to God without any thought or desire to return to self. In such love God is experienced as the innermost core of our being, as closer to us than we are to ourselves. And we know that we have been loved first by One who is selfless and faithful and tender. It doesn't love for a reward because the love and the beloved are reward enough already. Such love is bold and intimate and yet respectful. It is not love of just anyone but of God! It is clinging to God and self-surrender and the highest and most ultimate reality a person is capable of. That is why love of God is so holy and great and why it can never cease! God loved us first and gave us existence and life and loves us continually, even if we hate Him. The more rapturous God's holy beauty and goodness, the more this love surpasses everything we might otherwise call love. The flame which is the impulse to love like this always burns somewhere on the altar of our heart, even if we don't know it or admit it. When God redeems it by grace then it becomes Christian.

Only when this experience humbles us and we fall down in adoration does that flame burn with its special purity. We come before God's countenance only because God, in the Holy Spirit, has poured out his own love into our hearts. God has come to us! Because God has found us, we can seek God with our love mysteriously transformed into the divine love that has redeemed us. What is our prayer? "O God, you love me! Grant that I may allow myself to be loved by you. Grant me yet again that gift!" Whoever wants to honor God already loves God.