

5th SUNDAY IN LENT

People go to the shrine of Our Lady at Lourdes for many reasons. Some go out of devotion to Our Lady or St. Bernadette. Others go to join with friends on pilgrimage and to pray. A significant number may be looking for healing of some sort in their lives or in the lives of those they love. A few may have a bold desire for miracles.

One of the paradoxes of Lourdes is that there are few miracles of the kind where unexplained physical healing takes place. There are, however, many miracles of the kind that go unmentioned or unseen. Many such people are helped with how they deal with their illness. The sight of so many worse off than themselves, the patient and cheerful way in which disabilities are borne, the unstinting kindness and support of the helpers, all contribute to that atmosphere that sustains and uplifts the weary of heart, body and mind.

Then there are those who are struggling with the terminal illnesses of those they love. There may be a deep, wild hope that these illnesses can be changed or ended. Such hope does spring eternal in the human breast. These return from Lourdes, maybe without that hope fulfilled but not in despair. It is not that they necessarily accept what is happening, more that they encounter it at a deeper level; they find resources of strength in themselves and a learning and sharing with their dying loved ones that they had not known or expected before. For each it is different, but for each there can be the miracle that they most need.

Last week we heard the miracle of the healing of the man born blind. This week we listen to the even more astounding miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In both cases Jesus is trying to overcome the incomprehension of those who surround him. He even delays going to help his friends Martha and Mary when they send for him to help their sick brother. Neither disability nor death ultimately concerns Jesus. They are the means he uses to illustrate the power he receives from his Father and so to bring his listeners to believe in him.

The core of the story is the exchange between Jesus and Martha. Jesus declares to Martha that the resurrection of the dead is not merely for the end of time. Whoever lives and believes in him is already encountering the resurrection and filled with his life. Martha responds with her great declaration of faith, that he is the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was

to come into the world. In this she plays the same role as Peter in the synoptic Gospels. He too has his moment of recognition of Christ.

It does not mean that from then on either Martha or Peter fully understands. Just as Peter is immediately rebuked for trying to persuade Jesus out of the path of suffering and death, so Martha is unhappy at what might happen when Jesus asks for the stone to be taken away. Her expectation is still one of death and its smell, not life. But Lazarus comes forth and is unbound to go free, while many of those who have come to comfort the sisters now believe in Jesus.

During Lent we have been seeking to renew our faith through prayer, fasting and works of charity. Underlying all our activities is the desire to allow the new life promised us by Jesus to break even more into our lives. Such a deepening of faith may be especially likely to happen in the distinctive atmosphere of Lourdes or other shrines, but all the events of our daily lives offer such sparks to our belief.

We may find ourselves lacking in understanding of what is happening in our lives. When we fail we may be inclined to blame others and become embittered. When we are successful we may be too proud of our own abilities and have no space to recognise the help and support we have received from others. Sometimes we only change in ourselves when something radically alters in our lives, and then it is a question of who is around to support and enlighten us. When we recognise the healing and reconciliation that others offer us, when we really open ourselves to see and acknowledge the good done by others and allow all of that to touch our hearts, *then* our encounter with the risen Lord really begins. At that moment, like Lazarus, we too become unbound and go free.