

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT (JOHN 11. 1-15)

‘LORD, IF YOU HAVE BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED’ (JOHN 11. 32)

Friends, let me begin this brief meditation by reading again the words of Martha and Mary, ‘Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died’. We too have made similar statements or questions at times in our lives. God, where are you? Do you not see what I am going through? Why are you not taking control of my situation as my God? The world is asking the same question now as we experience the bite of COVID 19. God, where are you? Are you real?

Social media is overflowing with messages, videos, and trolls against God and prayer. Atheists ask to all religious groups – where is your God? Some even rejoice because worship places are closed.

There is joy even within different religious groups (hidden joy) – some are pleased that the Eucharist is paused – some cheer up because mosques are closed – some celebrate because Hindu temples are closed. And different religions try to answer the pandemic differently. One religious leader says that corona is God incarnate to punish all non-vegetarians/meat eaters. Some environmentalists/conservationists view that it is a penalty for killing and eating several wild and endangered species – because it all started in Wuhan market where such live animals are brought and killed each day.

And Christian responses are also diverse. Some say that COVID does not indicate God’s absence but it validates God’s presence – because it partly fulfils some Old Testament prophecies about plagues (Ex. Zechariah 14:12). Even quarantine is not an expression of unbelief. The Book of Leviticus provides very strict quarantine regulations for those suffer of infectious diseases (Ch 13). So it does not indicate God’s powerlessness to protect us or heal us – but it is a demand of wisdom and, especially, an expression of our neighbourly love. Noah’s arch is another example of quarantine – of a family. Jesus’ parents quarantined him as commanded by an angel when they took the child and escaped to Egypt to protect him from being killed. So quarantine is not alien to Christian faith. Some Christians view the pandemic as a wages of sin – and therefore, a call to people to repent and turn away from sin. And some others view this as the beginning of end times: God giving a slight taste of what life will be during the Great Tribulation that is mentioned in the Book of Revelation.

In today’s gospel we see a peculiar/interesting thing. Listen to this verse again, ‘Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he ‘stayed two days longer’ in the place where he was’. Here, three things are worth noticing: Jesus ‘loved’ them – also, Jesus ‘knew’ that Lazarus is ill – but Jesus ‘does not’ rush. He intentionally waits – delays himself. Because he saw in Lazarus’ death the possibility of the in-breaking of God’s glory.

So, what am I going to say? If I sound even a little that God wants to show God’s glory through the death of several thousands of people – that is not gospel at all. What

I say is... this verse says that Jesus loved them – Jesus knew what was happening - but delayed responding to the situation. In the scripture we find God using disappointments and sufferings as an entry point into human lives – suffering as an agency for transformation. In the death of Lazarus Jesus reveals himself as the Lord of resurrection and life.

In the context of the pandemic one thing we should not miss noticing is that - except us - human beings, the entire creation looks calm and peaceful with the virus among us. All on a sudden the nature is less polluted - the air is clearer – the water is cleaner – because thousands of flights are grounded – private and public transportations are cancelled – industries are shut down – poisonous smoke emissions reduced – we do not for know how long – but as of now, the nature looks rejoicing. And this virus proved much more powerful than several high table anti-pollution campaigns.

This virus is also teaching us a great principle of co-living – co-existence. It still lives in animals – but they don't have any problem. It still lives in many human beings without destroying human life. But when this virus wants to live aggressively in us we die. There are several bacteria and viruses still living in our bodies - they assist our living. Their habitats do not kill us. We have learned to live with them – and they have learned to live inside us. They will lose their habitat if they live aggressively in us. So they mutate themselves to milder life. But we, human beings, have not learned yet to live such a healthy life with the rest of God's creation.

I will be tagging a few videos after this worship to see how the nature is rejoicing (some of you must have seen them already). How they plead with us for an altered pattern of living with them. In the words of the gospel reading today – to unbind them and let them go.

God works through mysterious ways - but works always with a purpose – and that purpose is rooted in God's love for us and for all God's creation. No parent would want to see his/her children suffer – God does not want to see us suffer or fail.

In families now there is more time to spend together – the virus offered it. And we realise that we can also be happy for our family time. So, the virus is also teaching us to figure out the nonessential things in our life. The virus has also taught us to slow down and see those who are around us who cannot pace with the modern speed. So it is teaching us several basics of being 'human'.

I am not glorifying the virus – we need to combat it. We are to do everything possible to uphold life. God is the source and owner, redeemer and sustainer of life - and so, by protecting life we become participants in God's mission in this world.

As we pass through these difficult days let us be assured that God is with us – God sees us – Let us pray for the whole world – and also seek for God's will in our own lives, Amen.