

## **Homily: “Lazarus come out . Unbind him. Let him go free” John 11 :1 to 45**

We have in today's gospel, one of the most dramatic miracles of Jesus ministry. Indeed, in John's Gospel it was the seventh and final miracle that he performed. It also appears to be the one that finally brought the Pharisees to the point of plotting to kill Jesus. And so this gospel flows into and prepares us to enter into Holy week. Next Sunday we will celebrate Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem, from Bethany where this miracle occurred. Of course, this is a great story of hope and victory over the things that bind us.

This story is a beautiful and intimate one in the life of Jesus . It would seem that Jesus had a special relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The Scriptures record in several places how he went and shared meals with them. Perhaps they were part of his extended family. Certainly, Mary and Martha with people of great faith, and very much understood Jesus nature, as the son of God. As Jesus was arriving Martha went out to meet him and made that wonderful statement of faith. “I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one who was to come into this world.I know that whatever you ask of God – he will grant you “ Displaying his love and his humanity, Jesus is described as being in great distress at the sight of Mary's tears. Jesus wept, but exercised his faith in action as well. He goes to the tomb telling them to take the stone seal away. He then lifts up his eyes and prays to the father, thanking him for hearing his prayer and asking for his assistance. All those who were standing around would have heard, and would believe , that it was God the father who sent him.

He then cries out in a loud voice “ Lazarus, here, come out” What amazement and shock it must've been for the people to see Lazarus walk out of the tomb, wrapped in bandages, four days after he had been pronounced dead. But through this miracle Jesus was wanting to give them a foretaste of his own resurrection within the weeks ahead . He was also giving witness to the realization of Ezekiel's prophecy where God says “I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live, and I will raise you from your graves.” He was giving witness of how faith in him, can restore us, to new life.

As I've pondered these Scriptures over the last few weeks, they have been helpful to me in my ministry as an Army chaplain. Many of the soldiers and their families have been struggling with the aftermath of their experiences on deployment overseas. Quite a number of the soldiers are struggling with anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress. It's not just the memory and stress of their time overseas that troubles them. It's the difficulties they experience in readjusting to family life in Australia. In the last few weeks a number of soldiers have come to me , despairing over marriage difficulties that have resulted from the darkness of depression and anxiety. Of course, these are an illnesses that can affect all people in society, and I'm sure many, if not most of you here know someone who has struggled with depression or anxiety .

I found myself saying to these people, like Jesus said to Lazarus ; “Come out of these tombs ” “Take off those things that bind you.”

Of course , there are many dimensions to mental illness and relational difficulties and a healing process needs to address a range of therapies that include physical, mental, relational and spiritual components . I absolutely encourage people to go and see a doctor to help them with their mental health illnesses or injuries, but encourage them also to be open to spiritual healing and support as well. I desperately want them to live in hope.

An Army officer, whose wife had left him shortly after he recently returned from Afghanistan, said to me. “Im going out of my mind , I feel totally abandoned- Totally abandoned. Of course I reminded him that he would never be abandoned by God, and I and we as a church would not abandon him. He has been baptized, and so I was able to remind him of the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans : “The Spirit of God has made his home in you. The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, and he will never abandon you.” He acknowledged that he hadn’t even thought of bringing his situation before God. Together we did so in prayer , and he is now feeling better . He’s not completely healed yet , but now he has a new way of looking at life.

I am conscious that there may be some people here tonight / today , who are struggling with depression or anxiety themselves, or might have a loved one who is experiencing these illnesses. Firstly, I say to you that I empathize with you, as I have struggled with these demons myself, as indeed have some of my loved ones . So I don't underestimate the difficulty that you experience.

But I also say that we can receive healing, and that we can have hope that we will be able to rise again, despite any affliction; be it anxiety, depression, or betrayal . We can rise again, through the power of the Spirit of God who desires to set us free. We should access all available medical assistance, but also be open to the spiritual healing of God, through the person of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit .

Jesus tells us that he will put his spirit in us and we shall live. We receive the strength of that spirit, every time we come to the sacrament's. Indeed, every time we read and digest the word of God we can be encouraged . With mental illness particularly we are engaged on a battlefield in our minds . In addition to any physical or chemical imbalances that we need to have corrected , the soothing words of God can counter the negativity and faulty thinking , that the mind can serve up to us .

All of us can minister to others by calling them out of the tombs of darkness that people find themselves trapped in . We can affirm them that they are not alone ; they are not abandoned; that their situation is never hopeless . We are all loved , and loveable . We have value in God eyes , and no matter what circumstance we face in life we can rise again, through the power of the Holy Spirit , living in us .