



Parish of Mother of Unfailing Help

Leeds Cathedral & Holy Rosary



LENTEN REFLECTIONS

5th Sunday of Lent – 17th March - Monika Benitan

Monika Benitan works in evangelisation for the Archdiocese of Liverpool

'I am the resurrection and the life.' (John 11:1-45)

This reading gives us glimpses of hope. But it is easy to focus on Jesus' own resurrection and miss other important elements in this reading. Let's take Mary, for example. She is mentioned first, so it is possible she was the eldest in the family of the three siblings (Mary, Martha and Lazarus).

Inexplicably at first, Jesus does not respond to the heartfelt plea of the sisters, and Lazarus dies. Four days on, there is still mourning, and Mary seems paralysed. She remains seated in the house even with the news of Jesus' proximity. This will echo with many of us who have lost a loved one. Grief triggers inner exhaustion, a near paralysis that turns us into the shadows of ourselves. Even rumours of eternal life seem to be too distant to spur us into action.

Mary needs her sister, the ever-fretting Martha, to come to her after encountering Christ and making the most eloquent profession of faith. Martha whispers into Mary's ears: *'The Teacher is here and is calling for you'*. Jesus is called a teacher - not a prophet; not a messiah: a teacher. So what is it that Mary needs to learn? And what is it that *I* need to learn about grief and the place of Jesus *vis-a-vis* my pain?

Mary rises quickly and the consoling crowd notices it. Remarkably, the first word that describes Mary's rising (*egeiro*) has connotations of waking from sleep, the mini-death of the ancient world. It is the same rising of Joseph to fly to Egypt, the rising of the paralysed man who fetches his mat, the rising of blind Bartimaeus. However, what the crowd notices is Mary's rising (*anistemi*), a word connected later with Jesus' own resurrection. Something has changed in Mary, and it is obvious to the bystanders. Perhaps we could try to recognise what has brought us an inner awakening in similar situations. Perhaps we can listen out for the words that might bring us round if we are still stuck in overwhelming grief.

Unlike her sister, Mary draws a crowd before she falls at Jesus' feet. She repeats the first bit of what her sister has already said: '*if you had been here...*' But she makes no profession of faith. Her raw tears and tears of her consolers move Jesus profoundly. After his own words from John 1:39 are echoed back to him, Jesus weeps.

Despite her private profession of faith just moments ago, Martha objects to Jesus' instructions to take the stone away because of the stench of death. Mary is not mentioned anymore here, but we know that something profound is quietly forming in her heart. In the next chapter she anoints Jesus' feet with an extremely expensive ointment and the sweet fragrance fills the house. It is the fragrance of her gratitude, faith and understanding of what is ahead of Jesus. Perhaps we could sit with Mary today for a while and allow her to show us how grief could change into tender anointing.