

Fifth Sunday of Lent  
April 2, 2017

**Scripture Readings**

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, our first reading begins with the great vision of the valley of the dry bones – a battlefield of unburied corpses, with the stench of death and decay and Ezekiel’s reluctance to follow God’s command to revive them. However, with the help of a massive earthquake, along with the breath and Spirit of God, the bones clamored together and the limp bodies came to life again. This is most definitely a pre-figuration of the resurrection of the dead, but at the time, the Jews did not believe in that conception of the afterlife. Ezekiel’s words offer a stirring image of God’s restorative and renewing power for this life and for all eternity. Through the centuries, we as Christians reflect on this vision because we believe it to be our story as well. We believe in the power of God’s forgiveness and the ability of Christ and our Catholic tradition to revive us and give us hope even when everything around us seems to represent darkness, turmoil, death and despair.

This is one of my favorite Gospel readings and happens to be the longest continuous narrative in John’s Gospel, aside from the passion account. It is the compelling account of raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus knew very well the fragile nature of human life. After being informed of the death of his friend, Jesus goes to the entombed Lazarus. As we hear in this gospel, he himself is “the resurrection and the life.” But he goes to the tomb as one who is truly human, like us in all things but sin. This passage tells us that he loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus very much and that he was someone in whom they had much trust and confidence and who could understand their grief. We learn that Jesus is deeply disturbed by the harsh reality of death that has taken the life of his dear friend. It is thought that there may not be a more powerful line in all of the gospels than the three-word sentence given to us by John the evangelist: “And Jesus wept.” The Jews saw and believed how much Jesus loved him through the raising of Lazarus. They felt it to be an act of love, an act of friendship for someone Jesus cared about who was held in the frightening grip of death, an act of divine power – the power of God over death.

Life is indeed fragile, and the experience of death and loss can be so painful. But we believe in the crucified and risen Christ, the only one who has the power over death. As Saint Paul reminds us in the second reading, Christian life is a constant challenge but we have been given the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who dwells within us and who fills us with hope in the resurrection of the dead.

This account also invites us to reflect on our own lives and to discern the question of whether we find ourselves imprisoned in the darkness of our own sort of tomb. Of course, this tomb will have different forms and names for each of us. It may be the tomb of some destructive behavior or habit that burdens us and alienates us from others. Just like the people in the gospel passage, we may also fear that it’s too late to even get out of the tomb. Yet, as Jesus stood before Lazarus’ tomb and said, “Take away the stone,” Jesus will help us take away our stones of despair, of destructive actions and attitudes and He will offer us freedom and new life.

The tomb that I frequently find myself in, is the tomb of worry and anxiety. Usually over balancing daily chores and schedules of home and work, being a good wife, daughter, sister, employee and friend and most importantly, an adequate mother for the children that God has entrusted me with. There is an overabundance of difficult circumstances and pressing responsibilities in our society, for all ages. It may be final exams, GPA, difficult relationships, feelings of negativity, inadequacy, failure and disappointment, or the unending concerns about jobs, careers, finances and family challenges. Many of these things, we may not even have any control over but we still feel trapped in that dark and sealed off tomb, bound hand and foot-just like Lazarus. But Jesus comes to us in that tomb and is moved by the same deep emotion that he was over Lazarus. He will take away the stone and call us out of whatever tomb we may be living in and speak words of peace to us. He is the one in whom we place our hopes for the future and indeed, our hope for eternal life. As Christians, we do not expect to escape death, but rather, we approach it with faith in the resurrection.

The fourth century Bishop Gregory of Nazianzus (328-389) spoke about the miracle in Bethany that prefigured Jesus' own death and resurrection. I wanted to share these moving words of St. Gregory for your own personal meditation...

He prays, but he hears prayer;  
He weeps, but he puts an end to tears;  
He asks where Lazarus was laid, for he was a human being;  
    and he raises Lazarus, for He is God;  
As a sheep, he is led to the slaughter but he is the Shepherd of Israel and now of the  
    whole world;  
He is bruised and wounded, but he heals every disease and every infirmity;  
He is lifted up and nailed to the tree, but by the tree of life he restores us;  
He lays down his life, but he has the power to take it again;  
    and the veil is rent, for the mysterious doors of heaven are opened;  
    the rocks are cleft, the dead rise;  
He dies, but he gives life and his death destroys death;  
He is buried, but he rises again.

May we have continued prayers and blessings for this season of Lent and abounding peace and joy as we approach the Easter Resurrection.

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