

**Fifth Sunday of Lent A - *"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."***

March 19, 2023.

Our Lenten journey is drawing to a close; this Sunday's readings remind us of what lies ahead, with Ezekiel's vision of new life for a valley of bones (Ezekiel 37:12-14) and Paul's promise that the Spirit will 'give life to our mortal bodies' (Romans 8:8-11). The gospel reading from John tells the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). This sequence - carefully crafted as a prelude to the passion narrative – **prepares us for what is to come; Jesus confronts death and emerges victorious.**

As the narrative opens, the Lord's coming death is called to mind, Mary the sister of Lazarus is identified as the one who 'anoints the Lord with ointment – 'for 'the day of his burial '(cf. Jn 12:7). The illness of Lazarus 'will not end in death, but in God's glory 'and the glory of the Son of God. The death of Jesus, if he 'goes to Judaea 'is a real and terrifying prospect for his disciples – leading Thomas to exclaim, 'Let us go too, and die with him'. The narrative highlights the 'friendship 'of Jesus with the family of Bethany: soon to be caught up in the drama of the Saviour's rejection by the nation's leaders. Such a detail, we know, has significance in the meditative style of John's gospel. 'I call you friends, not servants '(Jn 15:15), Jesus will tell his disciples. With these words, Jesus gives encouragement for all who follow his way of discipleship.

We are left in no doubt that Jesus triumphs over death in all its horror. The mortal remains of Lazarus have been in the tomb for 'four days': 'He will smell', his sister warns. Numerous mourners have now assembled, not all of them well disposed towards Jesus – an intimation of what is soon to follow. 'Could he not have prevented this man's death', some of them ask. This confrontation with death, Jesus makes clear, is a sign. As he sets out for Bethany, after the death of Lazarus, he declares, 'I am glad for your sake, because now you will believe'. And although he knows that the Father 'always hears him', he addresses the Father publicly, 'for the sake of those who stand around, so that they may believe that it was you who sent me – 'the claim of his divine mission that is many times repeated in the course of John's gospel. In the exchanges that take place between Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus, he leads them towards the fullness of faith that will unite them with him in his final victory over death - his Paschal Mystery. Like his other disciples, Martha has already found faith in Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world'; now she is led to recognize the full implications of this coming, as she affirms her faith in the truth of Jesus 'words, ***"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*** – the very source of 'eternal life'. **Lazarus, here! Come out** : the victory is complete and absolute. **Unbind him, let him go free** : words of promise for all who will believe in his coming triumph.

Lazarus come out from that tomb! We all need to come out of the tombs we find ourselves in, whether we put ourselves in those tombs or we were put into the tombs by circumstances beyond our control. There are real tombs from which the Lord calls us. There is the tomb that we are in due to our very existence as human beings. What the ancient sages who wrote the Book of Genesis presented in the third chapter, the Fall of Man, is that mankind would rather push God aside, and lose himself and herself in the material world than listen to God, and keep Him in the centre his life. Mankind turned from the Lord of Life. Turning away from life is turning to death. This was not God's plan for us. He did not want us to die. He did not want our bodies to decay, as they do in tombs. He wanted us to have a full share in His Life. Think about the Assumption of Mary, that solemnity we celebrate on August 15. Mary was created without sin, always enjoying the spiritual life. When her life on earth was over, her body was not put into a tomb to decay. She was united body and soul to God. That was what God wanted for all of us. He sent his son Jesus the Christ to restore our spiritual lives. Jesus calls us out of the tomb from the cross.

Brothers and sisters, many people are in tombs due to no choice of their own. They have a serious medical condition that greatly limits what they can do. Maybe they have cancer, or heart problems, or other health problems. Jesus is calling them, calling us all, out of the tombs that sickness puts us in. Jesus doesn't want people to be sick. He healed people during his earthly ministry. He still heals people, heals us. He calls us out of the tomb of sickness to be united to Him. After I was ordained permanent deacon, I was on call 24 hours from the parish to bring communion to people in the last moments of their lives and pray with their families. (By Canon Law, Deacons cannot administer the sacrament of anointing of the sick). Many have said to me, "I am going to be alright, I might die, but I am going to be alright." The voice of the Lord calls us outside of our sick rooms, calls us to know that if we walk with Him, we will have life. No sickness can take the Lord away from us. Very often we bring on our own death - spiritual death. Some people are in tombs of their own making. They have experimented with substance abuse and become dependent on drugs, or they have given in to porn to such an extent that they are thoroughly addicted, seeing their lives dissolve around them. They may feel that there is no hope. But if they listen, they can hear the voice of the Lord, calling them, saying, "Come out of that tomb." And with the Lord they can walk once more into the light. Another tomb that many people find themselves in is the tomb they construct with their anger. So many of us are in tombs. We are angry because someone has done us dirty. We hold grudges which poison us. Jesus calls us out of the tomb of anger by calling us to forgive. He told us to pray, ***"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."***

But many of us tend to blame God when bad things happen calling those as God's judgment on sinners, or even saying, in resignation, "It was God's will." Bad things AREN'T God's will. At least not in any simple sense. If Jesus is God the Son, as we proclaim, we need to take seriously his tears at Lazarus' grave. Even though he had told his disciples earlier, "It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of Man may be glorified by means of it." In other words, "This is all according to the master plan. This will be for good." Nevertheless, at the graveside, Jesus-God as well as Man, wept. The tears were not simply for mourning the loss of a dear friend. They could be tears of rage at the evil of death, or even tears brought on by the stress of knowing what he was about to do would hasten his own agony. God's will was being done, and yet the Son of God wept. God's will cannot be so simple as we often imagine. He wills to bring all of us New Life.

Our New Life, like Lazarus', comes from Jesus' life. But it comes by way of his death. And by way of our own. We must not allow the darkness of the shadow of death to cloud all our days because for us Christians, death is the great moment of life. Our faith is rooted in the central truth of Christ's resurrection. The story of Lazarus gives us hope and tells us that God is stronger than death and he will bring us all who are his friends into eternal life. We need to be attentive to God's daily call to intimacy with him. By dying to sin, deepening our response to his way of life, by prayer, penance, acts of charity, personal conversion and joining ourselves to the passion and death of Christ is a sure guarantee of sharing in his resurrection. That New Life is ours if we accept it. It is what Jesus lived and died and rose to give us. Thanks be to God, Amen!