

Homily: Lent 5 2020

Few, if any of us at the start of the year would have predicted that before the end of the first quarter, things would be as they are today. Nor even as Lent began did we think there would be no ‘normal’ celebrations of Holy Week and Easter. Yet here we are in lockdown. But as ever the scriptures have much to nourish and feed our minds and hearts, as daily they are given to us by the Church.

Do notice how very human they really are, and right for this moment. **Ezekiel** in our 1st reading sets the scene, a scene many know from the spiritual based on the valley of dry bones. If you can, with more time on your hands, read the whole of Ezekiel 37: 1-14. The prophet sees himself in a valley full of the bones of the dead. God tells him to call on the ruah, (the Hebrew for wind, breath and spirit, both human and divine) to restore the bodies of the dead and bring them to life. The people of Ezekiel’s time were shattered by the Babylonian conquest and exile. The last verse ‘you will know that I, the Lord, have said and done this.’ The powerful imagery can speak again whenever our faith in God’s life-giving power grows weak.

The Psalm expresses the human need for God’s grace and forgiveness, and also praying, interceding for the people. Think of this psalm as the silent prayer of the ‘bones’ in Ezekiel’s vision: this is why the Church traditionally uses this Psalm to pray on behalf of the faithful departed. Just think and pray for all those at the moment dying around the world.

St Paul in the 2nd reading to the **Romans** gives plenty to reflect on as the present emergency raising many questions, lifts us to the higher spiritual level, and the Lenten theme of Baptism and Incorporation into Christ in the Easter mystery. This whole chapter is about life in the Spirit and the joy and confidence it brings. Paul does acknowledge we are still subject to the natural laws of decline and death, which Corona virus now focusses our minds, but Christ’s resurrection from the dead has brought a new principle of life into the world, which is ours for ever, if we accept his offer of faith and his Spirit, and become his sons and daughters of the Father with and

in him. We pray for those around the world preparing for the Easter sacraments, and the renewal of our own vows at Easter.

In a way Paul's appeal in this is summed up at every Mass by the words, 'Lift up your hearts! Sursum Corda.

All that leads us to the third of the great wonderful, if long gospel readings from **St John** that we have in year A in Lent.

Again think of how very human they are, giving a close up picture of all the people involved, and the very human Jesus.

I imagine the 2 main people we met in the last 2 weeks stories had no idea who they would meet, and what would then happen in their lives. Remember the initial meeting of the woman at the well, shocked by this tired, weary, thirsty Jewish man who asks her, a woman and a Samaritan at that, for a drink.

The man born blind, who had no real idea who the person was who mixed mud and spittle and made him see. 'A man called Jesus.' Both were led to a faith in Jesus, as the Messiah, the Christ, as the Son of Man, and believed and worshiped Him.

Lazarus of course did know Jesus, and Lazarus was ill. As in the two previous weeks, today's story has deeper levels of meaning than that of the mere sequence of events. Nowhere does even John's Gospel stress Jesus' full humanity and human love more, yet nowhere, equally, does it reveal his divine power so brilliantly. And irony is never lost on John, for as the raising of Lazarus was the last great public sign given by Jesus, it was the decisive sign for the rejection or acceptance of faith in Jesus. Because he was working all these miraculous signs, the Jewish leaders made the decision that he would have to be killed. The irony:

because of his power over life, Jesus was sentenced to death.

Restoring the dead to life was a miracle also associated with Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament, and with Peter and Paul in Acts. What happened in all these instances was not resurrection but resuscitation from the dead. This means coming back to the same form of life.

Resurrection is not a coming back but going forward to a new level of life beyond death. **Jesus is that Resurrection and that Life.** Notice little things like Jesus stays where he is for 2 days, only moving **on the third day** (he rose again from the dead, the Creed) Christ's other actions are humanly mysterious; why did he delay until Lazarus was dead, if he loved this family so much? His 'explanation' (echoing last week's theme of light and darkness) is equally mysterious. Jesus is supremely free and makes his own decisions.

The sisters have faith, as we have and Jesus responds to it, in ways delicately suited to their differing characters, as he does to us. To the practical Martha he gives teaching; with Mary he weeps in wordless sympathy. Jesus wept.

As the story moves to its amazing climax we are invited to believe that, as God really raised his Son to new life, so he gave the Son power to do so for others, and this is his plan for us also. The story is a model of our faith in the resurrection promised to all by Christ. The **seven signs of Jesus in John's gospel** are all essential one way or another, to human life, the three of these weeks **water, light, life** itself lead us through the next two weeks of passion, death and resurrection to the full glory of life and light of Easter.