

Lent 5

3. 29. 20

We are just two weeks from Easter, and at the moment it seems as though we may have to celebrate it by using the marvelous technologies now at our disposal. Therefore this Easter will be unique. We can only hope and pray that by this time next year this virus will have left us and we will be able to return to a normal celebration of Easter.

As you might expect, on this fifth Sunday of Lent the readings are about life, new life, because we are drawing near to the celebration of the Lord's resurrection at Easter. Today's first reading is taken from the prophet Ezekiel who lived at the time of the Babylonian captivity. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem in 597 B.C and returned ten years later, after another revolt by its

citizens, to destroy it and the temple. Ezekiel emerged as a prophet to the Jews in exile in Babylonia, promising them that God would restore them to their homeland. He does so by describing a scene in which the bones of the dead are reassembled by God and given new skin and new life. We know that scene well because we all know the beginning of that song, “Them bones, them bones, they dry bones, now hear the Word of the Lord.” You can find this passage in ch. 37 of the Book of Ezekiel, just before our first reading for today. There God calls upon breath, as if breath were a reality in itself, and says: “From the four winds come, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life.” And it happens. The bones arise. They are alive. They are people again. This is Israel promised new life. Then our present reading follows in which God says: “I will put my spirit, my breath, in you that you may come to life, and I will settle you in your land.”

Our second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans has been chosen because Paul speaks here of the spirit or breath of God which raised Jesus from the dead. Paul tells the Christians at Rome that they possess this same spirit. It lives in them and will give life to their mortal bodies, just as it once gave life to the Lord Jesus and to the dry bones of the defeated Israelites.

Our Gospel has this same theme, that of the divine spirit giving life to a dead man's bones, but it is an entirely different context, a beautiful context, that of the story of the Lord's friendship with two sisters and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus dies. The sisters send for Jesus. He comes and he brings Lazarus back to life. And he does this because he loves them. They are his friends.

But he is trying to teach his friends something. He is trying to tell them who he is and why he has come and what he wants to give them. He wants to give them life, even in death, even through death, and even after death. But his message is in a sense blocked by the human situation, that of the effect that Lazarus' death is having on his sisters. They are distraught. "Oh," they say to their friend, "If you had been here he would not have died." Is there an accusation in their statement? They both say the same thing to him separately, independently of each other. Are they saying to him, "Why were you so slow in getting here?" Are they saying to him, "You weren't here when we needed you"? And when this happens the second time, its affect on the Lord himself is powerful: "When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled...." What is translated as "perturbed" here is like someone groaning or a

horse snorting with rage or fear. “Deeply troubled” means that he is thrown into total internal disorder. And then we read: “And Jesus wept.” The text tells us that those around him saw his tears as signs of his love for Lazarus, but maybe it is not as simple as that. He is “perturbed” again as he comes to the tomb.

This much is clear: the gospels in this scene and in the scene in the garden on the night of his arrest present us with a Jesus who became emotionally involved, was torn apart by his own inner feelings and cried.

Could we interpret this scene at Lazarus’ tomb in this way: Jesus has come to offer us life. He sees this as the possibility for all of us. And yet what he finds in us is rejection of this offer and what naturally follows from this rejection, our death. And Lazarus’ death sets him off. Here is all that should not be. Here is

death as victor. But we know he recovers himself through prayer and reverses the situation. He puts flesh on those dead bones. He breathes spirit, that is life, his life, into Lazarus' dead face, and Lazarus walks out of his tomb into life.

We are now surrounded by death. But the Lord is still with us and his reaction today is the same as it was at Lazarus' tomb. He is groaning, torn inside, by all the death that surrounds us. But he will help us. He will reverse the situation. He will put flesh on our bones. He will breathe his life into us. We will walk out of our graves. All that he will do for us if we let him, if we invite him to do so and follow his lead. Amen.

