

Fifth Sunday of Lent A/2008

Everyone wants to make the best of life. In fact, we all love life and want to live it abundantly and in a wonderful way. But, we also realize how fragile it is, and how it is frightened by suffering and death. It is the mystery of life and death that today's readings invite us to reflect on in this fifth Sunday of Lent.

The first reading focuses on the situation of Israel in exile. At that time, when Israel was in deportation, the Israelites lost every hope for the future. Those who had once hoped in the inviolability of Jerusalem and their past history are now in despair. They see themselves like a corpse without life in a tomb. They think that God has abandoned them to their miserable fate.

It is against that background that God sends Ezekiel to prophesy. Through the mouth of the prophet, God promises a new life to his people. All those whose hope has turned to despair will be led from their existence of death to new life in the land of Israel. God will open their graves and restore them to new political existence. That is what the prophet put in words like: "I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land".

The picture Ezekiel describes in this vision is not that of an individual resurrection, but that of a new corporate political beginning of Israel. This idea of corporate resurrection will be superseded by Jesus' teaching on the individual resurrection, as we heard in the Gospel with the resurrection of Lazarus.

The spiritual premises that allow us to understand what happened to Lazarus are found in the second reading as St Paul says, "If Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you".

What St Paul wants to say with these words is that there are two kinds of life. The first is dominated by sin; it is self-centered and cares only for human desires and passions. Such a life ends up in a complete death. The second is dominated by the Spirit of God. It is Christ-centered, focused on God and controlled by his Spirit. Such a life is destined to heaven even when it is still on earth. In that sense, the main point of St Paul is that those who have been baptized in Jesus Christ and received his Spirit should respond to that internal power of God and live out of it. Only, then, can they be really alive.

This thought of St Paul finds its application in the life of Lazarus. First of all, when Jesus received the message of the illness of Lazarus from his sisters, his reaction was that the sickness would not end in death, but for the glory of God and his. What he meant by that was that it was an opportunity so that people may see the glory of God in action.

When the disciples try to warn him not to go to Judea because of the threat on his life, Jesus assumes completely his destiny. Like in a day where there are twelve hours of darkness and twelve hours of light, he has come in order to be

the light of the world. While it is still light, he has to work and to finish the mission for which he was sent. He has come to accomplish his mission, no matter what it might cost him. Here we see how the mission of Jesus is linked to the cross. It is impossible to separate the glory of Jesus from his passion and death. This is true not only for Jesus, but for every Christian: there is no glory or success in our undertakings without effort and sacrifice.

In the continuation of the conversation, Jesus states clearly that Lazarus is not just asleep, but really dead, and that was a good thing so that his disciples may believe. That was a good thing not only for the disciples, but also for the sisters Martha and Mary who, in a kind of desperate hope, reproach Jesus that if he would have been there, their brother would not have died.

By letting Lazarus die, Jesus is telling us that he has not come to prevent physical death. His task is not to break the natural course of events, including the course of human life. He has not come to make this life eternal, but rather to give another life that will have no end. In fact, as Christians, we all experience physical death like other people. However, because of our faith in Jesus, our death becomes a way that leads us to share in Christ's resurrection. Through Jesus Christ, we know that we are journeying not to the sunset but to the sunrise. We are not on our way to death, but to life.

In that perspective, the true meaning of Jesus' mission is to give life to those who believe in him. Then, he can say: "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". It is clear that Jesus is not thinking here in terms of physical death, but in terms of spiritual death by contrasting the present life with the life to come. That is what happened to Lazarus as Jesus raises him from death.

What happened to Lazarus is an example of what will happen to us when we trust Jesus and his word. He will not leave us remain in the tomb for ever. He will raise us so that we share in his resurrection. In that sense, we have to take advantage of the present time to prepare ourselves for eternal life. We must renounce sin and use the grace we receive in the sacraments to strengthen our faith in Jesus. That is what Lent is all about. Let us not miss the opportunity to become better than what we have been up to now.

I would like to finish by referring to this moving scene of Jesus weeping at the death of Lazarus. By so doing, Jesus teaches to be compassionate in the face of human suffering and death. As St Paul says, "Mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who are in joy". One of the marks of friendship is the ability to share with friends their moments of joy and sadness. Perhaps that's what we have to do in this time of Lent. God bless you all!

Ezekiel 37, 12-14; Romans 8, 8-11; John 11, 1-45



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