

Fifth Sunday of Lent A/2017

The readings of this fifth Sunday of Lent talk about the reality of death and the promise of eternal life. They invite us to invest deeply in God who is able to give life to our mortal bodies at the end of our pilgrimage on earth.

The first reading is related to the exile of Israel in Babylon. It describes, through the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, God's promise to bring them back to their land. It explains the liberation of Israel in terms of resurrection from the graves. It shows that in order to let them live, God will put his spirit in them and allow them to settle in their land.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is the healer of souls and the giver of life. Another idea is the truth that nothing is impossible for God, because however desperate might be the situation in which his people are, he can change it for the best for their good. The last idea is the affirmation of the faithfulness of God who fulfills the promise he makes to his people.

This text helps us understand the stakes of today's Gospel as it talks about the resurrection of Lazarus. First, the Gospel describes Lazarus as the brother of Martha and Mary, who once anointed Jesus' feet with a perfume. Then, it reveals that Jesus loved the two sisters and their brother and that when he got sick, they sent him a message in order to let him know.

In the first part, the Gospel says that, though Jesus was informed about the sickness of Lazarus, he nevertheless stayed where he was for two more days. Then, contrary to the advice of his disciples, he undertook to go to Judea when Lazarus was already dead.

The second part of the Gospel describes the arrival of Jesus in the village of Bethany and how the two sisters were full of grief at the idea that if he would have been there, their brother would not have died.

After that the Gospel describes the trust of the two sisters in Jesus, namely that even though their brother was already dead, God was still capable of hearing his prayer. Then, it gives the reaction of Jesus who affirms that he is the resurrection and the life so that whoever believes in him, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in him will never die.

The third part of the Gospel describes the meeting of Jesus with the grieving Mary and his deep emotion at the sight of her tears for the death of her brother. Finally, the Gospel describes the resurrection of Lazarus by showing what Jesus did in order to bring him to life.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the hope for eternal life. First of all, let me start with the story of my visit to Israel. In fact, when I visited Israel I could not believe with my own eyes that the Jewish people, who have been wiped from the map of the world for centuries, have started living again. They had not only a land, but also a country and a state. I saw in the existence of Israel the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel and I was convinced in my heart that, whatever might be the circumstances we can go through, God is capable of giving us life again.

It is that life that Jesus has given back to Lazarus. But, in order to appreciate what happened to Lazarus and its relevance for us, we have to confess that the outcome of our life is a complete mystery to us. We certainly know our past, because it is already behind us; we understand to some extent our present, because it is still in the making,

but we do not know the future, because tomorrow is unknown to us. Plus, life is fragile and crossed by sufferings and death. Like Lazarus who, though loved by his sisters, died anyway without these preventing his death to happen, we will one day face the reality of death.

Such a vision shows that we are sojourners and strangers on earth. Whatever might be our life on earth, rich or poor, we will one day leave everything behind us. In that sense, Jesus has not come to prevent natural death to happen to us, but rather to prepare us for the reception of eternal life. In other words, Jesus has not come to make this earthly life eternal, but rather to give us a hope of another world and an assurance of a life that will never end.

Therefore, as his disciples, we will all experience physical death like other people. However, because of our faith in him, our death will be changed into resurrection. That is what today's Gospel is all about, namely that Jesus has the power to transform our mortal bodies into glorious ones.

Moreover, because we are on pilgrimage on earth, our true home is not here, but above. That is why as long as we are on earth, we are journeying not to the sunset, but to the sunrise of our life. When everything of what we have built on earth will stop, we know with the assurance of faith that our true life will start.

Does it mean that the present life in the world is meaningless because we will die one day? Not at all; on the contrary, that makes our task in the world urgent and important, because our future life depends on how we lead our life now, whether it is with Jesus or without him, in faithfulness to him or in rebellion to him. What is at stake, therefore, is the truth that what we build on earth does not have finality in itself. Rather, it is in preparation and in anticipation of the world and the life to come.

In that perspective, the goal of Jesus is not that we live eternally on earth, but that from the way we live on earth, we come to live one day with him eternally in heaven. Then, we understand why he says: "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".

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the death and the resurrection of Lazarus have a character of exemplarity. What happened to him is exactly what will happen to us who believe in Jesus. We will certainly die in our bodies, but in order to rise to life anew. Jesus will not abandon us in our tombs. He will raise us so that we share in his resurrection.

In that sense, we have to take advantage of the present time in order to prepare ourselves for eternal life. We must renounce sin and use the grace we receive in the sacraments, especially in confession, in order to strengthen our faith in him. That is the appeal of this time of lent as we approach slowly to the celebrations of Easter. May God bless you all!

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



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