

Return from Exile
5th Sunday of Lent (A)
(Ez 37:12-14; Jn 11)

The first reading from Ezekiel prophesies the return of the people from exile to their own land, renewed in spirit, risen from the grave: “*O my people, I will... bring you back to the land of Israel... I will put my spirit in you that you may live... thus you shall know that I am the LORD.*” In one of the daily government briefings from the White House, the president spoke of his hope that by Easter things will begin to get better, and the nation will rise again from this quarantine.

A plague like this truly is a reminder of the Lenten lesson: “*remember man that you are dust, and to dust you will return.*” This epidemic is a type of spiritual Lent that God is imposing on the whole world, to remind all mankind of the need to repent, to believe in the Gospel, and look to Easter for answers.

Civil authorities and medical experts are able to accomplish many things to mitigate illness, help those who become sick, and protect our communities from infection. But in the end even the best efforts are limited, and they help us only in this world. God is reminding us that our human life is much more than this world. God wants us to have not simply a good quality of life on earth, but to experience the fullness of eternal life which is given to us only in His Son.

This life first comes to us through the waters of Baptism, which Jesus spoke of to the Samaritan woman a couple weeks ago: “*The water I shall give will become in [you] a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (Jn 4:14).

In the Gospel today, Jesus again reminds us that our true Life is found only in him, and not simply in our earthly life. Lazarus contracts an illness and dies. Even though Jesus could have healed him, Jesus allowed the illness to take its course. The man’s sisters, Mary and Martha, were devastated: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*” (Jn 11:21). But God used this illness and death of Lazarus to reveal a greater truth: Faith in the Jesus (in the Christian Gospel), brings a greater Life even if when we lose our earthly life. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are brought beyond this life to the next. And even though we still have to experience the sufferings and trials of this world, including plagues and the curse of death, it is not the end of our human life and existence. There is resurrection.

Jesus 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*” (Jn 11:25).

These words which Jesus speaks in the Gospel today are reminders about how important our Christian faith is, and how important the sacramental life is that begins with Baptism. No matter what we have to go through, like the family of Lazarus who had to bury their brother, we place our faith in these words of Jesus, which are the words of God himself.

Every year during Lent, we remind ourselves through ashes that we are mortal – we are dust and to dust we will return. We remind ourselves how important it is to turn away from sin now, and commit ourselves in faith to God, so that we might be delivered from the curse of sin and death. We prepare ourselves for 40 days through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, to renew our Baptism promises and celebrate the new life of grace at Easter.

This year, God is providentially reminding the whole world that the calling of Lent is for all mankind, that this call is deadly serious, and the Gospel of Christ is for all mankind. There is only one way to be saved, and that is through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is only one way to experience those sacred words of Jesus – *“I am the Resurrection and the Life”* – and that is in the sacraments of the Church.

In the Gospel today, we hear how Jesus gave a special sign on earth of the Eternal Life of heaven which he brings. He restored Lazarus from the grave to his earthly life, as a miraculous sign to everyone of the more important Life which he gives us through his own Resurrection, through Easter.

Let us pray that in this year, 2020, the Lord God gives us another sign of His mercy again, by allowing us to come back from our exile and return to the sacraments at Eastertime. Let us be humbled by this biblical experience, and remember how important our Christian faith is, which must never be taken for granted. Let us continue to pray for deliverance from this epidemic, that our exile might soon be over, and we return to our land.