

5th Sunday of Lent A/2011

The readings of this fifth Sunday of Lent talk about the reality of death and the promise of eternal life. In fact, our life, as beautiful and enjoyable as it might be, is fragile and precarious, because one day it will stop. But, is death the end of everything? Is there anything to hope for after this life? The readings of this Sunday try to answer these questions by giving us hope and assurance that even if we will die, we are, however, destined to eternal life.

In the first reading, the prophet Ezekiel compares the life of the Hebrews in exile to the dead bones lying in the graves and without life. In spite of this sad situation, however, God will open their graves and give them life back. He will put his spirit in them so that not only will they live, but also they will return to their home land.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is the master of death and life. There is no desperate situation for him and there is nothing impossible to him. Wherever his beloved ones are in need and whenever they call upon him, he is able to answer them and change their situation for the best.

What God is capable of doing for the people, as a group, he can also do for the individuals in particular. But, the key to this blessing of transformation of life of the individuals and of the group is faith. Thanks to faith in Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus dwells in us and we belong to him. Because it is so, whoever does not have the spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

The consequence to draw from this statement is that, as the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, as St Paul says in the second reading, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies. Therefore, even though our body might die because of sin, thanks to the presence of Jesus and his Spirit in us, we will live forever.

All that helps us understand the importance of today's Gospel as it relates the miracle Jesus performed by raising Lazarus from the dead. First all, there is this poignant fact that when Jesus received the news of the sickness of Lazarus he did not rush to go to his bed. Instead his reaction was that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, but it is for the glory of God and his own.

No one can understand such a reaction unless it presupposes that any circumstance of human life, whether it is of joy or of sadness, is an opportunity to let God's glory shine upon his beloved ones.

Therefore, when Jesus went to Bethany after two days, he certainly knew that whatever might have happened to Lazarus, he had the power to deal with it. In fact, as it would happen, Lazarus was dead since four days, to the sorrow and the regrets of his sisters who would have hoped Jesus to be there in order to save him.

But what can be impossible to God? It is here that Jesus is teaching us something about eternal life and the kingdom of his Father. In fact, by letting Lazarus die, the great lesson Jesus teaches us is that he has not come to prevent natural death to happen to us. Human life has to follow its course that goes from birth to adulthood and from these important steps of human growth to death.

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. If that is the case, it means that, as Christians, we will all experience physical death like other people. However, because of our faith in Jesus, our death becomes a passage that leads to eternal life and to the sharing in the resurrection of Jesus. Through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus, we are on pilgrimage on earth. Our true home is above where the Father is awaiting for us. 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, then, our true life starts.

Not that the present life becomes meaningless and without importance. That would be a misinterpretation of the kingdom of God and words of Jesus. What is at stake, in fact, is the truth and the conviction that what we build here on earth does not have a finality in itself. Rather, it is a preparation and an anticipation of the world and the life to come.

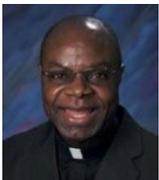
In that perspective, the meaning of Jesus' mission is not that we live eternally on earth, but that from our life on earth as we believe in him, we come to live one day with him eternally in heaven. Then, we can understand why he says: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die".

With regard to this goal, it becomes clear that the death and the resurrection of Lazarus have an exemplary character. What happened to Lazarus 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.

What happened to Lazarus is an example of what will happen to us when we trust Jesus and his word. 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 Jesus.

That is one of the appeals of Lent so that as we pray, fast and do the works of charity, we come to the conversion of our heart. Let us not miss the opportunity to become better than what we have been up to now. Let us count on Jesus' mercy and compassion and ask of him forgiveness for our sins. May you have a wonderful Lent that will lead you to Easter with purified hearts! May God bless you all!

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



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