

FIFTH SUNDAY

OF LENT

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalm 130:1-8

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Reading the Word

First Reading:

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open

your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

Second Reading:

Romans 8:8-11

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel:

John 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33-45

Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be

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glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the

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Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him..

Hearing the Word

“God’s Call to Life”

The sequence of the Lenten Sunday readings inevitably leads to the ultimate question of life and death. Death places an inescapable limit on human life, but the liturgy of the word for this Sunday counters this seemingly inevitable reality of death with a message of hope. The prophet Ezekiel was active during the time of the Babylonian exile. His mission was to maintain hope among those who lost everything, witnessed the destruction of their country with its irreplaceable Temple, and now lived in a foreign land. Living through years of captivity the deportees faced despair and hopelessness. In was a slow physical and spiritual death. In the midst of this darkness the prophet delivered a message meant to reawaken their lost confidence in God and in the hopeful future. First, Ezekiel explained that when their relationship with God died through their indifference and misdeeds, they also died as God’s people. But that agony was not the end of their story, because the faithful God has already planned the restoration, as is evident in the prophets earlier words, “I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land (Ezek 36:24)”. God never gave up on the people, and always intended to restore Israel ruined by death.

The prophet compared the Babylonian exile to the “grave”. But the grave would be opened and the people would return, their spirits

reanimated by God’s Spirit. This image harks back to the creation story when human beings were formed out of the dust of the ground and vivified by God’s breath of life (cf. Gen 2:7). In parallel to the early days of humanity in Eden, where the first people knew God intimately as creator, and friend, the restoration of the nation after the exile will enable the Israelites to again experience their God as the life-giver. This God of life would never abandon them to death, according to his words, “you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people”.

In the second reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul contrasts two alternative lifestyles followed by those who “live in the flesh”, and those who live “in the Spirit”. The first group marches towards death, while the second group walks towards eternal life. The presence of the Spirit is the key. Those who walk the way of life are guided by the Spirit, since the Spirit dwells in them. When the Spirit is present, and at work in the heart of an individual Christian and in the midst of the community, that person/group becomes God’s dwelling (cf. 1 Cor 3:16). Those living by the Spirit not only have God present in their midst but also walk towards eternal life because this Spirit is the “Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead”. Thus, living by the Spirit in this world, believers experience that “the body is dead because of sin” but their hope of eternal life is secured through the same

Spirit dwelling in them. Living according to the Spirit transforms this mortal life into a walk, not towards death, but towards the final communion with God in eternity.

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, is the last of the seven signs performed by Jesus in John's Gospel. Performing the first one, in Cana, the evangelist commented, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (Jn 2:11). Performing his last sign Jesus commented on the illness of Lazarus saying, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Subsequently, when calling Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus said to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

To see the glory of God means to experience God's presence and action, in a very real and visible way. During the Exodus, God's glory was revealed to the people on Sinai in the form of thunder and lightning (cf. Exod 19). In the Gospel, God's glory is revealed through the life-giving actions of Jesus. In John's perception, death is not an end of anything, rather, it is a vehicle of God's self-manifestation in Jesus.

This dynamic of transforming death into glory is particularly evident in Jesus' own death and resurrection, which the death and raising of Lazarus in many ways prefigures. In the Lazarus story, John alludes to the period of two days when Jesus remained where he was

before starting on his way to rescue Lazarus. In Jesus' own case, he would remain two days in the grave before, on the third day, the glory of God would be manifested by raising him from the dead. God's glory manifested in Jesus is nothing else but the gift of life that overcame the power of death.

Faith is crucial in both the story of Lazarus and in Jesus' own story. Jesus began his ministry in Cana by inspiring his disciples to believe in him. They became his friends. Lazarus, Jesus' friend, was rescued from death by Jesus who demanded faith from his sister. By making these connections John the Evangelist intends to show, that in Jesus God's life-giving presence is manifested, and that it requires a response of faith, in order that this gift of life that overcomes death may be received. Jesus' powerful statement to Martha provided the best summary of the message of the entire story, as he stated, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live".

In today's readings, the prophet Ezekiel and Paul link death with sin and its consequences. But they also both state that God stands for life, and opens the way to bring nations and people out of death. For Ezekiel national restoration was a sign of God's life-giving intentions, while for Paul it was the presence of the Spirit. Life under the guidance of the Spirit is the path to eternal life. Yet, it is in Jesus that one fully understands God and experiences his glory – God's decisive and visible action of

bringing life out of the grave. Jesus did it to Lazarus in God's name; God did it to Jesus personally. Those who walk in the Spirit and respond to Jesus with faith, will also experience God's voice calling the dead out of the graves, and out of mortality to the new life. This is a trustworthy assurance, well expressed by the Psalmist who stated, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord".

Listening to the Word of God

To enhance the message of today's readings, we might think of a common ethical principle of the value of human life which most societies in this world share. All that enhances life is good, just, desirable and should be supported. On the other hand, what diminishes human dignity, what exploits and dehumanizes people, is unethical and unjust. Taking this perspective into account, God's call to life can be considered in three steps.

First, God is the author of life, the creator of all living and non-living beings. God not only made everything, but also sustains all of creation. Human life as sustained by God is sacred, and must be respected, and treated with deserved dignity. Our Christian responsibility is to respond to God's call to life, by promoting and preserving life. Jesus weeps when innocent lives in the wombs of mothers are killed and considered as mere body tissue. And he weeps when we destroy our own life with alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or other reckless activities.

Second, life is a cycle, and the ancestors and traditions play a vital role in the community of life. Our ancestors are a part and parcel of the moral and spiritual formation of the community. Jesus weeps today when, in many communities, elderly persons are abandoned and neglected by their own children. Today, care for the elderly has become a distressing and troublesome issue in most modern societies. In the past, the elderly were valued as sources of blessing and stability in the community; they were the custodians of wisdom and teachers of customs essential for the young. Today, Jesus weeps when old people are sent early to their graves because of neglect and disrespect, and their wisdom is disregarded and neglected.

Thirdly, life is a communal affair lived in genuine relationship and communion between God, people, ancestors and the land. Today, very few can proudly say, "I am, because we are". It seems we are rapidly losing the cultural values that brought us together as a community. Extended families are replaced by small nuclear families. Individualistic and egoistic values severely weaken the once-admired communal way of life. Jesus weeps when he sees crowds of street children roaming the streets and dying of hunger, homelessness and violence in the midst of crowded cities. Jesus weeps when he sees world leaders making themselves ever richer while their people fall ever deeper into poverty. Civil wars and political violence are promoted because of their selfish

interests, and good productive land is sold to foreigners for bribes.

To follow God's call to life is a duty of every person. Traditional society values are perfectly in agreement with God's call to life that we find in the Scripture. As Christians we must look at life as the precious gift from God. This requires that we should be promoters of a culture of life rather than the culture of death. It means that our daily dealing with others, in our cities, villages, communities and parishes must reflect Jesus' call so powerfully heard today, "Lazarus, come out" and live.

Proverb

**"I am,
because
we are."**

Action

Self-examination

Do I consider my life as a precious gift of God and, if so, how do I protect it?

Do I destroy my own life through reckless and unhealthy living?

Response to God

In the course of this week I will thank God daily for my life and pray that I might live it well.

Response to your World

In responding to God's call to life, I promise God, that in the course of this week I will visit a sick person in my community and pray with him or her.

As a group, let us chose one activity that will show our respond to God's call to life. For example, we organize a seminar or workshop to educate and enlighten the community about the sacredness of human life and how we ought to protect life from conception to natural death.

Prayer

We thank you Lord, for the gift of life which you have given us.

For we know that you created us out of love for the purpose of living our life well and helping others to do so too.

Continue to give life to our mortal bodies and save us from spiritual death.

Let your Holy Spirit direct our actions and thoughts to be life-giving people to one another.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.