

Lent 5 - A - 2

Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45

Fear of illness and death is something that sits in the back of our minds at different times. When we are young and healthy, it is only a passing thought. When we are teenagers ... and sometimes long after that ... we even tempt death - carried away by a sense of invincibility that leads us to risky behaviors. When we are worried about a potential danger that might get to us, or we are sick, or when we are older and approaching the natural end of our earthly life - it is much more in the mind. Today's readings help to bring us to a more stable place. Not in defying, denying, or trying to cheat death; not in being worried and consumed with fear of death. It is a place that the Lord leads us to that is grounded in reality, and also rooted in the tremendous love God has for all of us.

We can look at the negative aspects of our inevitable death. We can look at what will not be there for us, to the end of this earthly existence - to the end of the only life we have known. That can be frightening. Even though we know that another life awaits us after our bodies die - we've never seen it, and we can fear the unknown as much as we fear the scary things we do know. Jesus reminds us that there are two kinds of death. There is a death of the earthly body - that we cannot escape - and there is a death of the spirit in the next life. We can't get out of death of this body, but there is a way out of the eternal spiritual death. When 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*, he does not mean that those who believe in him will live here on earth without ever dying - look around, that is clearly not the case. In this statement he is talking about two different types of death. When he says "even if he dies" he is speaking about the death we focus on and get worried about; when he says that everyone who lives in him and believes in him will never die, he is speaking about spiritual life and death. He raises Lazarus, in part to show in visible way what he has the power to do. Just like he has the power to raise someone from bodily death, so he can snatch someone from the grips of spiritual death and give them an everlasting life.

God has been speaking about coming to bring this life through the whole of our history. God has promised to bring some way to rescue us from death. The rescue from earthly death is that God provides at eternal life. We heard from the prophet Ezekiel: *Thus says the Lord GOD:*

O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, ... I will put my spirit in you that you may live ... Then you shall know that I am the LORD. Jesus has come to put that spirit in us, he has come to bring us out of a spiritual grave as easily as he brought Lazarus out of an earthly tomb. In our second reading, Paul also echoes this truth: *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.* Living in faith, prayer, and worship keeps the door of our hearts open to that Spirit, following God's law and becoming holy helps to not drive out that Spirit by sin - all of this invites and allows Spirit of God to dwell in us - and this is the key to receiving the gift of an eternal life.

But why does God do this? God could just as easily have let us simply die, go out of existence, and that's the end of it - God could have allowed us to exist forever, but left us in a hellish existence with no way to happiness in the next life. We see in the story of Lazarus a powerful example of the deep care God has for us. Except for his passion and death, there is no place in the scriptures where we see Jesus express such emotion. Surrounded by grieving people he is moved. We hear the simple phrase *Jesus wept* - not "was sad," not "cried" - the original word used by the author gives an impression that try though he could he could not contain the emotion. But, Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus - so you may think he would say "hey don't be sad, look at this!" - you would think that his knowledge of what he was going to do and how happy everyone would be would make him happy too. But even with that knowledge he looks down at the sisters crying, he looks at those around who are sad - and he is so sensitive to them that he can't help but feel their pain. This is the exact way that Jesus responds to us. When Jesus looks down on us in our fears, and worries, and pain he cannot help but be moved to tears as he allows himself to feel what we feel. When he sees someone reject faith in Him and sacrifice eternal life, it tears his heart out - what love he has for us all!

It is this love that God feels for each of us intensely that makes it impossible for God to let us simply go out of existence when our bodies die. It is because of the deep individual value God places on us that he has come to earth to provide us a way out of the hell of the life of a spirit who is separated from the source of all spiritual life. A God of such love, and God who gives us such a gift is with us today. Jesus feels our worries and pains at this time, and lets us know a great truth that should comfort us: *I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives [in me] and believes in me will never die.*