

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Death and Resurrection

March 29, 2020

Fr. Max Oliva, S.J.

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Death and resurrection is our primary theme in today's readings.

Exile in Babylon for the Israelite people was a form of death. In our first reading, God speaks to them through the prophet, Ezekiel, of restoration, to a restored homeland. Using a very graphic image, God says, "O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel."

St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes of the dual dynamic of death and life in terms of 'flesh' and 'spirit.' Flesh refers to the human person weakened and debilitated by sin, who lives only for sensual things. Christian existence, on the other hand, is centered in the indwelling spirit; that enables a person to live a virtuous life.

Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, is the focus of the gospel. Word comes to Jesus that Lazarus is dying. Jesus does not return immediately to Judea to where Lazarus had lived with his sisters Mary and Martha and where he, Jesus, had often stayed when he was travelling to Jerusalem. He delays so that people might believe in him as being the Messiah when he raises Lazarus from the dead.

According to scripture scholar, Roland Faley, this incident has a strong theological interpretation: Lazarus represents the faithful Christian, the true believer. The raising of him symbolizes the resurrection of the Christian. Whoever comes to Jesus in faith will never experience spiritual or total death. The believer has already passed from death to life, and final resurrection will simply confirm what has already taken place.

How might we relate this dual dynamic of death and life to our own life. I propose, on three levels:

First, in terms of the Corona Virus: Some people who were in reasonably good health are now in self-isolation, others have died from the disease.

Second, in terms of the many events which have been cancelled because of the threat of the virus, including public Masses. This is a form of death for most of us. But there is life, too, as author and composer David Haas points out: "Love has not been cancelled; prayer has not been cancelled; goodness has not been cancelled; loving relationships have not been cancelled; music has not been cancelled; courage has not been cancelled; community and solidarity have not been cancelled; hope has not been cancelled; and God's presence with us has not been cancelled."

Third, and I take this level from Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton. Taking his cue from another of St. Paul's letters (Ephesians) where Paul wrote of the 'old' self – the self that lives by deceitful desires – and the 'new self' – created in God's likeness and living a true life – Merton wrote about the 'false self' and the 'true self'. The true self is that part of us that really believes that we are personally and unconditionally loved by God and thus want to do what God wants; the false self is that part of us that wants to exist outside of God's love and wants to go its own way.

Now, let's look at these two aspects of the self in terms of the Corona Virus. The true self does not blame God for it or think that God has abandoned us; the false self thinks that the virus is some kind of punishment inflicted on humanity by the Creator because of our sins. Examples of the true self during the pandemic are selfless acts of kindness, charity, and genuine concern for others in our community; the false self is seen in 'panic buying,' hoarding, price gouging, and a lack of empathy for others. Merton taught that the only way we can become our true self is through the death of the false self. With God's help we can do just that. And so we pray:

Loving God, you have created us
in your own image.
We humbly ask you to free us
from those elements of our
personality that are harmful
to us and to others;
raise us up from the grave
of our false self
and bring us to the sunlight
of our true self.
We ask this in the Name of Jesus;
Jesus, who raised Lazarus from
the dead and gave him new life.

AMEN.

Ezekial 37:12-14; Psalm 130:1-8; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

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