

Homily of Fifth Sunday of Lent of Year A 2020

The first reading was Ezekiel's prophecy to the people of Israel while they were in exile in Babylon. They had resigned to hopelessness that they would never be free, and would never return to their homeland. Ezekiel was one of the prophets God sent to give hope to the people. The images Ezekiel used to describe the people's situation, as we see in the reading, are death and grave. Ezekiel then prophesied spirit, life, and restoration. Ezekiel prophesied, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them... I will put my spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you upon your land..." This prophecy was fulfilled in about 597BC when King Cyrus of Persia released the people of Israel to return to their land (Ezra 1:1-11). The king decreed, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem." ... "In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem."

In the Gospel, Lazarus was dead and was four days in the grave. He was brought back to life by Jesus. It was a hopeless case before Jesus arrived. When Jesus was told that Lazarus was ill he did not proceed immediately to visit Lazarus. It took him four days before he arrived at the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus ordered, "Take away the stone." He commanded, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus came out with hand and foot tied with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Finally, Jesus ordered, "Untie him and let him go."

The Israelites were seventy years in Babylon before they got their freedom. Lazarus was four days in the grave before Jesus brought him back to life. This means that sometimes, difficult times can last for a while. Sometimes, it takes a while before God answers our prayers. Therefore, during difficult times, we are encouraged to persevere in prayer. Jesus promises in Matthew 24:13, "The one who perseveres to the end will be saved."

The Israelites never believed that there was hope for them to return to their home land. But when it was God's time, it came very fast and easy, and with unexpected blessings. The people of Israel did not fight for their freedom, and they left Babylon with so much gold and silver to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Also, in the Gospel, nobody believed that Lazarus would live again after being dead for four days, but Jesus brought him back to life. There is nothing God cannot do, even in the most hopeless cases. Therefore, let us take courage faithfully. God has the final say. God speaks to us through Prophet Ezekiel, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them."

A very difficult question is often asked, "Why do innocent people go through trials?" Jesus' words answer this question. About Lazarus Jesus said, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the son of God may be glorified." And Jesus said to Martha, "If you believe, you will see the glory of God." Last Sunday, Jesus said about the blind man, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him" (John 9:3). In John 16:33 Jesus says, "I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world." St. Paul adds, "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, and who are called to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). These words of Jesus and St. Paul give inner light and strength to faithful and spiritual persons. Non-spiritual persons are incapable of comprehending the spiritual meanings of the words.

The Israelites were under the yoke of slavery in Babylon. Lazarus was dead and in the grave covered by a stone. He was bound hand and foot, and his face wrapped in a cloth. We may have our kind of yoke enslaving us; we may be experiencing the sting of death and feeling like being in the grave; we may be feeling like we are weighed down by a large stone; we may be feeling like tied by hand and foot; we may be feeling like our face is wrapped in a cloth. As St. Paul prayed in the second reading, may the Spirit of the One who raised Christ from the dead give life to our mortal bodies, break our yokes, raise us up from our graves, remove the stones weighing upon us, untie us and set us free. Amen.

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