

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

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

"Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all." (G.K. Chesterton)

We live in a most threatening and uncertain world. Covid-19 takes away thousands of lives each day. As of this morning (03.29.20) 31,914 people are dead, and globally 680,583 people are affected (USA – 123,781) by the deadly virus. Families suffer the loss of their loved ones. Nations face economy breakdown. No Church services, no social gatherings, no schools. We live under the “Stay at home Order.” We live in constant fear. Our hopes are buried, and our faith is fading.

The liturgy of the word on this 5th Sunday of Lent reminds us not to lose hope even in the moment of apparently hopeless situations. G.K. Chesterton once said, "Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all." Hence no situation can be so hopeless as we think it be.

In the first reading from the book of prophet Ezekiel we read God announcing through Ezekiel a promising future for His ruined people. It is something which we all want to see at this time of great anxiety. It is a promise of the regeneration and restoration of our lives weakened by sin, sickness, and the difficulties of this life. Ezekiel assures God’s people that do not even death will stop Him from carrying out this promise. Yahweh says, "I will open your graves, make you rise from them, put my spirit in you and bring you back to your own soil." In the gospel story of today we see this becoming a reality.

In the gospel for this Sunday we read the miracle story of Jesus raising Lazarus to life who was dead for four days. It happens in a situation, when the family members and neighbors of Lazarus had lost all hopes as he was already dead for 4 days and started decaying. In fact, when Martha, the sister of Lazarus objects to the opening of the tomb and says, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (John 11:39), she is expressing the common view that this is now a hopeless situation.

In traditional Jewish mentality bringing back to life a person who is already dead for four days and decaying, is unthinkable. Because, traditional Jewish belief had it that the soul of a dead person somehow remains with the body for three days. After three days the soul departs finally from the body never to return, and that is when corruption sets in. But Jesus

with this miracle of raising Lazarus to life proves that nothing is impossible for God. It is never too late for God to revive and revitalize a person, a church or a nation.

But first we must cooperate with God.

How can we cooperate with God so as to experience God's resurrection power in our lives and in our world? Well, the answer is obedience and doing God's will.

To effect the miracle, Jesus issues three commands and all of them are obeyed to the letter. That is how the miracle happens. First, "**Jesus said, 'Roll away the stone.' ... So they rolled away the stone**" (vv 39-41). Did the people understand why they should do this heavy work of rolling away the tombstone to expose a stinking corpse? You bet they didn't. But it was their faith in Jesus expressing itself not through intellectual agreement with Jesus but through practical agreement with him, through obedience. Why didn't Jesus command the stone to roll away of its own accord without bothering the people? We don't quite know. All we know is that divine power seems always to be activated by human cooperation. As C.S. Lewis said, "God seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures." God will not do by a miracle what we can do by obedience.

The second command Jesus gives is directed to the dead man: "**Lazarus, come out!**" and **the dead man came out**" (vv 43-44). We do not know the details of what transpired in the tomb. All we know is that Jesus' word of command is followed by immediate obedience. Lazarus gropes his way out of the dark tomb even with his hands and feet tied up in bandages, and his face all wrapped up. Even a man rotting away in the tomb can still do something to help himself.

The third command again is addressed to the people, "**Unbind him, and let him go**" (v 44). Even though Lazarus could stumble himself out of the tomb, there was no way he could unbind himself. He needs the community to do that for him. By unbinding Lazarus and setting him free from the death bands, the community is accepting Lazarus back as one of them.

Dear Brothers and Sisters

Of all the miracles Jesus did, the raising of Lazarus ranks as the most astonishing to the people of his time. These days as a global community we are going through a situation in which the pandemic covid-19 has threatened us and suspended our normal life. The number

of people dying everyday around the globe and those getting affected day by day increase our pre-occupation and challenge our hope. We are badly in need of a miracle to bring us back to our normal life.

Jesus is ready for the miracle. He himself said, "**I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly**" (John 10:10). Are we ready to cooperate with him for the miracle? Are we ready to roll away the stone that stands between us and the light of Christ's face? Are we ready to take the first step to come out of the place of death? Are we ready to unbind (i.e. forgive) one another and let them go free?

While being locked down to stay at our homes, respecting the instructions of our civil authorities, let us turn to the Lord like Mary and Martha with, faith, hope and conviction that the Lord will not abandon us. May the words of comfort and consolation from prophet Ezekiel and St. Paul become a reality in our own times. God bless you all!!