

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent

All of us have been affected by the Coronavirus, most of us inconvenienced by not being able to socialise or shop, but an increasing number being infected by the virus, and a growing number dying because of it. Death is literally all around us as the graphs on our TV screens show daily, and with death there is fear, will I be infected, will there be a bed for me, a ventilator, the staff to treat me? And if I die, will I get a proper burial since there can be no church services, who will be able to be there? Coronavirus has brought death into our homes in such a way that we are forced to face it in a way that perhaps we have avoided doing so before.

For some death is the end after which there is nothing, only oblivion, which affects how life is lived, the decisions that are made, the priorities chosen during life. Our scriptures today suggest otherwise. In the first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, God is not addressing an individual but a whole people, a people, moreover, that has been exiled, its capital, Jerusalem, destroyed, its Temple desecrated, its population decimated. Is this the end, or can there be a future after such devastation? Listen to God speaking through his prophet, 'I am now going to open your graves, I mean to raise you from your graves my people...(A)nd I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live...' Is this a pipe dream or is this a promise?

A grave, or a tomb, appears in the gospel passage, one of the most touching stories in John's Gospel. Jesus is told by his friends, Mary and Martha that their brother is ill. We might expect him to go and visit immediately, isn't that what we would do, but he does nothing for a couple of days. Eventually he decides to go despite the disciples warning of the dangers he would face going anywhere near Jerusalem given the growing opposition to him by the religious leaders. When he arrives Lazarus has died and Martha greets him with the word we so often use, 'If...' which allows Jesus to speak first about Lazarus 'rising again' and then about himself, 'I am the resurrection and life, those who believe in me, even if they die, they will live. Do you believe this?' Martha says she does and even goes on to call Jesus, 'the Christ, the Son of God.'

Outside the tomb, Jesus literally breaks down with grief for his friend, then tells those present to remove the stone, despite Martha's objections of the smell of decaying flesh. Jesus thanks his Father for hearing his prayer and then, with great effort, summons Lazarus from the tomb and tells those present to 'Unbind him, let him go free.' Jesus visited this tomb and restored life to Lazarus who would eventually die again as we all must. Jesus, too, will die a violent death, but death will not have the last word because the Father will raise him from the tomb in which he was laid, and the disciples will experience him in such a way that they will remember his words to Martha, 'Those who live and believe in me will never die.' As the death toll from Coronavirus rises daily, we need to remember this story and Jesus' promise as we recognise God's presence in the sacrificial love of so many in the medical and caring professions as they risk their lives to keep us safe.

Bidding Prayers for the 5th Sunday of Lent

Celebrant:

With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption. With these words of the psalmist in our hearts and confident that God wants to transform death into new life we pray for all in need this day.

Reader:

For the Church at this time - that those in positions of leadership will enable all its members to act responsibly in face of the Coronavirus which is sweeping through the world.

Lord in your mercy

For those who govern nations and who lead corporations - that they will be men and women of righteousness, upholding the human rights of all people and reaching out to the poorest and most vulnerable in our world.

Lord in your mercy

For those who are filled with fear at this time because of Coronavirus - that they will be strengthened by the courageous work of all those in the medical and caring professions who are putting their lives in danger to protect the rest of us.

lord in your mercy

For all those who feel trapped in the grave due to illness or addiction - that they may be set free and rise to new life.

Lord in your mercy

For thos who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disaster or Coronavirus, and Ethel Lancashire and Wilfred Ferrall whose anniversaries occur this week - that they and all who gave died may rest in peace and rise in glory.

Lord in your mercy

In the silence of our own hearts we pray for our own special intentions.

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary as we say, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

All loving God, your Son is the resurrection and the life. We believe in him and trust that eternal life will be ours. May the prayers we offer this day come before you and may you send the Spirit upon us to make us people of justice, peace and love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen