

5th Sunday of Lent, Year A

Today's readings take us to the depths of our human need. A fortnight ago we saw Jesus offering himself to the woman at the well to slake the deep thirst in her soul for love. Last week we saw Jesus offering himself to the blind man who desperately longed to see. Today's readings confront us with death, not primarily our physical death, but the death we experience in our soul and the despair that overwhelms us when we have no hope, no future, no energy for life.

In the First Reading God promises to give us his own Spirit when our spirit fails. In the Second Reading Paul picks up the same theme assuring us that Jesus has poured his own Spirit into our hearts to give us life. All this is dramatically portrayed in the Gospel.

Before coming to the Gospel, however, let us delay on the Responsorial Psalm in which the Psalmist cries out from the depths to God. The central theme of the psalm is one of waiting, reminding us that we can be very presumptuous in our dealings with God. We know that God loves us and so we can fall into the mistake of thinking that we can somehow presume on God's love and somehow control it. We might mistakenly think that all we have to do is switch on our prayer and God will have to reply on demand. A moment's reflection shows the error of such an idea.

When we hope to have a meeting of special significance with another person, we experience hope and perhaps excitement, but also some anxiety and fear. Am I ready for the encounter? Is the other person ready? We know that the other person is free and we can't expect things to happen just because we want them to. So it is with meeting God in prayer. God cannot give himself to us if we are not ready to receive him. And just as well! God is love and God will not force himself without our free welcoming. If we want God's grace, however, God will be preparing us for it, and this may mean a long wait. We might be wanting a comforting and reassuring experience of God's presence, whereas what we might really need most is an awareness, in love of course, of our need for repentance and conversion. When we cry out to God from the depths, we can be confident that God is listening. But are we really ready for God to hear our plea? God wants us to live and to live to the full. Sometimes this may bring us comfort; but sometimes it may challenge and upset us.

It is easy to see Lazarus as a symbol for us all. How often we, too, feel that we are in a tomb: cut off from life – dark, hopeless, dead; disappointed in a relationship that has lost its spark; sucked into the quicksand of sin and unable to find any solid ground or to struggle free; entombed in a cold dark place with a huge boulder blocking out the light – a boulder too heavy for us to move aside by our

own power. Today's Gospel is a powerful reminder that God does not want things to be like this. He wants us to live and to live to the full. We see Jesus weeping, and he is weeping for us and for those we love. The climax comes when the voice of the Son of God pierces through the darkness: 'Lazarus, here! Come forth!' followed closely by the authoritative command: 'Unbind him! Let him go free!'

Let us put our own name there as Jesus calls to us: 'Michael, Come forth!' Maureen, Edward, Julie ... come forth!' He is calling us out into the light. We hope that we will hear that call when we die and are placed, literally, in a tomb. But the Church reminds us that Jesus is calling to us now out of whatever tomb we find ourselves in. He also calls out to those who love us: 'Unbind her! Let him go free!' God weeps when he finds us bound by a habit of sin, by addictions, by past hurts. Jesus wants us to be free. So much so that he went through the passion to convince us of his love and to persuade us to put our trust in God the way he does and to respond to his call and walk out into the light into the waiting embrace of Jesus.

While there is much here for our personal reflection, the aspect of the readings which I would like to bring out in this homily is that which is picked up beautifully in the opening prayer of the Mass in the older liturgy. There we pray for the courage to embrace the world in the name of Christ: 'Father in heaven, the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross in order that his brothers and sisters might glory in new life. Change our selfishness into self-giving. Help us to embrace the world which you have given us, that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter.'

We are invited to think of the darkness and pain of our world and to remember that the Heart of Jesus wants to free everyone from our many and varied tombs. The Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 130) concludes with the amazing act of faith: 'It is He who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities'. Nowhere else in the Old Testament do we find such an all-embracing trust. The psalmist expresses the hope that God will redeem us from *all* the evils which entomb us.

It is a personal cry, but we are reminded that it is a cry that is rising up from the whole world. We who know that Jesus weeps for us and keeps calling us into the light want others to know this as well. Jesus embraces Lazarus. He longs to embrace us. He is God incarnate, and so his heart reaches out to the whole world and to each and every person in it. God is the Father, the Mother, of all and he wants to call everyone forth into life from whatever tomb we are buried in. Let us listen to Jesus' cry calling us into life, but let us also listen to him as he calls us to join him in calling others to come out of their tombs and to cease binding

others in such a way as to take away their freedom. Let us claim our Catholic heritage and reach out to embrace everyone to share with us the life of communion with God.

The motto of the Religious Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) is 'May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved, forever'. We are all called to be missionaries of the Heart of Jesus and so we must experience an urgent call to go out to everyone to call them into life - the life offered by the Heart of Jesus. Listen to the opening words of the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone'(GS §1).

One who is truly 'Catholic' cannot be content to find personal security within a praying and worshipping community. We are grateful when grace frees us from the tombs where our soul has lain buried. We are grateful when our community, too, is called forth into a richer and freer life. However, we cannot forget the tombs that bury so many beautiful people in the community and in the world around us. We cannot belong to Jesus without weeping with him and without calling people to leave their tombs and come into the light to enjoy God's embrace. The greatly loved Pope John XXIII died on 3rd June 1963. On May 31st, just prior to receiving the last anointing, he shared these thoughts with those who stood around his bed: 'The secret of my ministry is in that crucifix you see opposite my bed. It is there so that I can see it in my first waking moment and before going to sleep. It is there, also, so that I can talk to him during the long hours of the night. Look at it. See it as I see it. Those open arms have been the program of my pontificate. They say that Christ died for all, for all. No one is excluded from his love, from his forgiveness. What did Christ leave to his Church? He left us his prayer 'that all may be one'(John 10:16). ... In this last hour I feel calm and sure that my Lord, in his mercy, will not reject me. Unworthy though I am, I wanted to serve him, and I have done my best to pay homage to truth, justice, charity, and the meek and humble heart of the Gospel. My time on earth is drawing to a close. But Christ lives on and the Church continues his work. Souls, souls. That all may be one!'

Let us listen as Jesus, with tears in his eyes, calls us out into the light; and let us not be afraid to weep with him and to echo his call to others as they lie bound in

darkness. We must never lose the desire that an Easter will come when everyone is here keeping vigil with us and sharing in communion with him who is the life of our souls.