

God grieves and opens our graves

Fifth Sunday of Lent – Cycle A – 29 March 2020

Ezek 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45

“I’m going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people” (Ezek 37:12)

Prologue: Today, we could reflect upon two powerful Biblical images: (a) grief and (b) the grave. These days, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the whole world is grieving and experiencing unprecedented disease and unimaginable death, we have Jesus weeping at the death of Lazarus, too, while also commanding the mourners: “Take away the stone!” and crying out: “Lazarus, come out!” Our God weeps with us, but calls us to new life, too.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Ezekiel—whose name means ‘God strengthens’—was a prophet and priest of the temple of Jerusalem and was among those deported to Babylon in 597 BC. On the one hand, he was a firm denouncer of the sin and evil of his people, predicting that they would be sent into exile; and, on the other, he was also a great consoler, pointing to the light at the end of the tunnel with God’s assurance: “My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (37:27). The punchline in today’s passage is God’s promise, “I am going to open your graves!” (v.12). Just prior to this passage we have Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-11), referring not to people who are physically dead, but who endure a metaphorical death since everything they revere—their identity, sense of community, covenantal security, king, temple, land, etc.—is totally destroyed during the exile. They were living in graves, so to say, and were longing for a revival of all that was destroyed. God promises them revival, renewal and restoration by way of God’s Spirit, new life, and land, respectively (v.14). Contrary to popular interpretation, this passage does not speak of the resurrection of the body but may be said to prepare providentially for later revelation on the resurrection of the dead.
2. Obviously, the gospel reading throws light on one of the most powerful “signs” which Jesus gives, namely, of opening Lazarus’s grave, thereby not merely indicating that he has divine power to bring back the dead to normal, physical life, but, more importantly, that those who believe in him will be raised to eternal life. “I am the resurrection and the life” (v.25) is the central revelation, which unfolds at two levels: (a) human—in the interactions of Jesus with Martha and Mary, and (b) divine—in Jesus’ words and actions at the tomb, which reveal his divine sonship. At the human level, by restoring dead Lazarus to life, Jesus is signing his own death warrant; for, this sensational miracle will lead to his final journey to Judea and Jerusalem to be crucified. Thus, John, the evangelist, places the resuscitation of Lazarus’s miracle just before the narratives of Jesus’ death and resurrection for theological reasons. ‘Lazarus’ is the Greek from the Hebrew *‘El-azar’*, meaning ‘whom God helps’ (See Lk 16:19-31), while ‘Bethany’ means ‘the house of the afflicted’. In sum, God is going to help those in the house of the afflicted. The sisters send a message to Jesus: “Lord, he whom you *love* is ill” (v.4). The scene is illumined by the light of love. In the shorter version, when Jesus arrives at Bethany, “Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days” (v.17). As in their meal-encounter in Luke’s gospel (10:38-42), Martha seems more ‘active’ than Mary. On hearing about Jesus’ arrival, “Martha went and met him, while

Mary stayed at home” (v.20). Martha believes and trusts in Jesus—she knows the Jewish teachings about death and resurrection, and also knows that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of God” (v.27). Practical as she is, she warns about the “stench because he has been dead four days” (v.39). Martha’s focus is on Lazarus’s dead body, decaying, and his tomb. Not so, Mary! Her focus is *Jesus*. While the Jewish mourners thought that “she was going to the tomb to weep there,” Mary rather went to *Jesus*, knelt before him, and wept (vv.31-33). Mary assumes a stance of worship, total trust and surrender. Now, everything is entrusted to Jesus. In sensitive solidarity with the grieving family of his loved ones, “*Jesus wept*” (v.35). The shortest sentence in the Bible tells us that God grieves with a suffering people.

3. After weeping, Jesus leads the mourners to the tomb—the grave of tears, stench, death. Jesus soon reveals his oneness with Abba, his Father. His prayer does not intend to change God’s mind by only bringing Lazarus back to life (for he will die again!); but Jesus knows that the God of Life is revealing Godself in him and through him. Thus, his cry “with a loud voice” (v.43): “Lazarus, come out!” echoes and signifies God’s power and presence. His next command, “Unbind him, and let him go” (v.44) is reminiscent of his God-sent mission to unbind the fettered and set prisoners free. He is truly Lord and Master over death. Many Jews who witness this unprecedented event “believed in him” (v.45).

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Theme: Paul’s letter to the Romans too implicitly promises, “I am going to open your graves” by revealing that: “God, who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit.” God’s Spirit is the guarantee that we too, like Christ, will rise from the dead. However, before that final resurrection of our bodies, we fight the fierce battle between spirit and flesh. For Paul ‘flesh’ almost always has a pejorative meaning, namely, the human tendency towards sin. Thus, Paul writes, “your bodies are dead because of sin!”

Today’s Psalm: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” is one of the ‘Penitential’ psalms. It does not so much lament over the sinner’s fate as much as it expresses confidence in God’s mercy and forgiveness. It also expresses every human’s longing for God “more than a watchman for daybreak.” The ‘depths’ referred to are not those of hell or purgatory—though the psalm is often used to pray for souls in purgatory—but of a helpless person being stuck in mud, sinking.

Global Grief and Grave Concerns: With the unmitigated onslaught of Covid-19, the electronic and print media is full of news about fears, threats, cures, sacrifices, deaths, mass burials and so on. To remind themselves constantly of their fragile existence and inevitable death, monks of old built ossuaries in their basements where human skeletons and bones were preserved. Visitors to the Capuchin monastery at Via Veneto, Rome, or Palermo, Italy, can still see such ossuaries. In the midst of sickness, grief and death, let us not forget that Jesus weeps with us and wants us to continue the mission he has begun. It is heartwarming to see the so many Catholic priests, as well as doctors and nurses—especially in Italy—have sacrificed their lives for others, thereby becoming models of Christ-like love, service and sacrifice. We must help God to open graves, even now.

Prayer: While last Sunday our prayer was, “From darkness Lord, lead us to Light”, we can pray today, “From death, Lord, lead us to the fullness of Life!”
