

Fr. John's Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent, March 26, 2023

JMJ CHS

A few words about the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel. These are words from God to His chosen people, delivered by the prophet at the time of the Babylonian Captivity. Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed and Ezekiel was captured, along with the other best and the brightest of Israel, and taken to Babylon where they would spend an appointed amount of time. This exile was perceived as a punishment for their sinful ways. Nevertheless, Ezekiel has some hopeful words, "Thus saith the Lord: "I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back to the land of Israel." Which he did. He kept his promise. The time of the exile lasted about 70 years.

So the Jews returned to their homeland, rebuilt the temple, and their turbulent history continued. But then, as predicted by Jesus himself, Jerusalem would again be destroyed. This time by the Romans. And again, it was perceived as a punishment for the sins of the people. The year was 70 A.D. And so began another 2000 years of yet another exile.

But after WWII, a remnant of God's Chosen People returned to their homeland and rebuilt their country making it into a world power. And so it seems that the promise continues. Here God bestows a great blessing on his people, but I think the ultimate blessing will be when He opens their eyes so that they will finally recognize their savior.

Recently on YouTube, I watched some man-on-the-street interviews conducted by a very pleasant young man who was a Messianic Jew. This is a Jew who has indeed recognized that Jesus is that savior. He was walking around Jerusalem with microphone in hand, talking with fellow Jews and asking them about a particular passage from scripture. Not from Ezekiel, but from Isaiah. Chapter 53. This is known as The Suffering Servant passage and it has typically been pushed aside by the rabbis. They do an 'end run' around it, because, well, it's controversial. It brings up a touchy subject. This ancient passage describes someone in the future. It speaks about someone who will be despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, one who was held in no esteem. And it goes on with many other descriptions of someone who would die for the people. "And by his stripes..... we were healed."

The people listened attentively to the young man's explanation and a lot of them admitted that they have not been exposed to that particular chapter. Maybe some of them were a bit uncomfortable as they at least recognized the possibility that the person in Isaiah chapter 53 speaks about someone who has already come, but was indeed rejected by his people.

And so, the prophecy by the other prophet Ezekiel still has its time. Part of it has been fulfilled in that they have returned to their homeland, presumably for the last time. But are they yet to be lifted from their graves? The graves of unbelief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? So, the movement has begun. I've been told by one Jewish convert that every city and town in Israel has a Christian community. So the final fulfillment of the promise may be near.

Well, I'm very familiar with today's Gospel passage because I have used it quite a bit in funerals as it supports the "good news" of resurrection. People are grieving the loss of a loved one and even though they might be faithful souls, there still may be that little lingering doubt that can creep into their hearts. Suffering, death and dying. What is it all about? Is there a life after death? Or is this all there is?

The question of resurrection in Jesus' time was an open-ended one. Not everybody believed that there was a life after death. It was up for debate. Among the religious leaders, the Sadducees did not believe in it but the Pharisees did. And Jesus, of course, sided with the Pharisees. Not only did He believe in Resurrection, but as He said, in today's Gospel, "I am the resurrection, and the life."

The raising of Lazarus was not a random event. It was planned. Jesus knew that He was going to perform a great miracle and so He delayed his arrival, to let nature take its course. So, Lazarus did indeed die. And the sisters said, "Master, if you had only been here, our brother would not have died." Their vision was a bit narrow. But not completely. Martha was still remotely hopeful for a positive outcome, but they were talking about preventing death. While Jesus is talking about restoring life. And so it happened. Jesus prays to His Father, and is given the power to raise Lazarus from the dead. And many came to believe in Him.

So as we read this beautiful story so many years later, what can it mean for us? Each and every one of us is going to die, but we are assured by Jesus, again, that He is the resurrection and the life. And He says, whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die.

This is a paradoxical statement, and He asks Martha if she believes. This is a timeless and universal question. The raising of Lazarus was not just for Lazarus and his family and his friends and neighbors. It was for us. And not just at funerals.

His question is for us as well. Do we believe? Our answer must be like Martha's. "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who has already come into the world." And will come again.

~Fr. John