



5th Sunday of Lent



Date: Sunday, April 2, 2017 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** A

First Reading: Ezekiel 37:12–14

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 130:1–8 | **Response:** Psalm 130:7

Second Reading: Romans 8:8–11

Gospel Acclamation: John 11:25a–26

Gospel Reading: John 11:1–45

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today I want to talk about the readings but I also want to say a few words about the past week in South Africa and how the readings have resonated with me experiencing this. Today's readings talk about three things. We hear talk of prophesy in the first reading, a righteous spirit in the second reading, and death and resurrection in the Gospel, or in Lazarus' case, resuscitation, from the dead. In a nutshell, we are witnesses to the promise of new life in the world.

The raising of Lazarus which was our Gospel text this evening is the third text from John that has traditionally been used during the Lenten period to prepare catechumens for Baptism. Baptism we remember is the sacrament wherein we are given new life. In this, the greatest of Jesus' signs, the lessons for baptism are brought to a climax. As the dead man Lazarus comes out of the tomb alive, the mission of Jesus is most fully expressed. "I came so that they might have life and have life abundantly". Let us remember that this is Jesus' desire for all of us this Lent: that we have life and have it abundantly. This abundant life is also what he tells Martha as well: he is the resurrection and the life. In our second reading Paul, in his letter to the Romans, develops what this means for us who believe in Jesus and have been baptized in Christ's name. We are told that by virtue of the Spirit of Christ that we received at our Baptism, we are caught up in his resurrection and can therefore be sure that some day even our mortal bodies will share his life.

Finally, in our first reading we hear from the prophecy of Ezekiel, where resurrection functions as a sign that points to the power of God. The power of God to bring the exiles in Babylon back to the land of Israel.

Putting this altogether, I believe that we are reminded that resurrection is not a private matter; the new life God gives through the Spirit is not just for us to enjoy, but it brings communities together, as well as individuals, and it reintroduces life into them. We must endeavor to be righteous and believe Jesus' words, so that we might have life and live it to the full.

So those three points that I think are made in the readings today have to do with prophesy, righteousness, and death and resurrection. And as I was thinking about this this week, I saw these three things play out in what has happened in our country.

Firstly death and a particular type of resurrection were visible in the very public passing of Ahmed Kathrada and in the events of his funeral and memorial service. We saw how Muslims, similar to the Jewish family of Lazarus that we read about in the Gospel, desired to bury their dead within 24 hours. And so the nation quickly witnessed a very moving funeral. In ways I'm sure we all appreciate, the passing of Uncle Kathy has brought the nation together. One might say that in his death the country has found new life. Out of the hopelessness, doom and gloom that pervaded the country, Ahmed Kathrada was able to spark a new hope: when his words for the President to step-down were repeated by the past President, it was as if Kathrada's spirit was given new life, and in that, the country too received something very vital.

But this new life was also invigorated also by the prophetic utterances we have seen from the former Minister of Finance and his deputy on Friday. I'm sure many of us were glued to our televisions, radios and Internet connections on Thursday and Friday. I watched the Press Conference that was held at Treasury and listened to the call to 'connect the dots' and to 'organize', which I'm sure has awakened the resolve of very many people across the land. This is what prophecy does – it calls for bold action in the name of higher ideals – righteous values. In the case of Ezekiel, God was saying that he will put his Spirit within us and we shall live. We need not fear. We will know that it is the Lord because he will remove us from our graves. Well, perhaps I'm stretching this a little, but I felt that both Messrs Gordhan and Jonas were trying to wake us up from our

slumber by bidding us to organize and to take note of what is going on in the country. Like Mary and Martha saying to Jesus that their friend Lazarus was ill, we can say to the Lord that our country's leadership is ill, and has been ill for some time. And like in the Gospel, where we heard the shortest verse in the bible, I think Jesus would weep at hearing this too. He would weep with us on hearing how sick our country has become with the cancerous scourge of corruption and we have no option but to joint together and fight against it, with the Lord's help.

What is this cancer that is killing our country? It is quite simply rooted in the ancient vices: pride, greed, lies and selfishness. For that really is at the heart of the matter of all the problems we are facing in this country. We have elected leaders who do not, as Trevor Manuel reminded us this week, possess a moral compass; who have created, as Pope Francis often says, an idol out of Mammon, who have sacrificed their values for the hedonistic satisfaction of their unsatiable greed.

We have entire so-called 'news' channels dedicated to perpetuating lies instead of truths: 'fakenews' in their regard is too kind an adjective. We have politicians who have been found guilty by the courts and who simply choose to ignore them, thus showing all of us that they believe themselves to be above the law.

It was at times such as these in the Bible that God sent prophets – to remind the leaders of the people that they are there to serve. Though they probably didn't mean to, I felt that these two former ministers, Gordhan and Jonas, were and are prophetic.

Now I cannot tell Catholics who to vote for. And I would never do this. But the Catholic Church has always urged each member of the Body of Christ to be involved in politics: to campaign for the common good; to defend the poor and the defenseless; to use our talents that God blessed us with to help our fellow man; to welcome the stranger and the orphan, and to uplift the afflicted.

I do believe that what we have seen in the last week is a serious turning point in our history. And we are faced with a choice. We can either let it pass and see further corruption, cronyism, and nepotism destroy our society to the point of it becoming a fully-fledged kakistocracy – or we can join together – with people who perhaps we don't usually agree or associate with – and together liberate the country once again. We can choose to work towards a new life, a better life. Our

country, like Lazarus, is ill. The Lord has sent prophets in the form of the many men and women who are honest, who do speak truth to power and who are concerned with the plight of the poor. We can listen to them and hear the echoes of the Word of God in what they say, in how they are advocating for peace, honesty and uprightness – everything that makes us righteous in the eyes of God.

We see for ourselves what happens when morally bankrupt individuals are entrusted with high office – they do not serve the people and the poor suffer. We must individually assess how truly we live our Christian values – values that we embraced in our baptism. Because we are always judged by how we live our lives.

As bad as the last week has been – we are now living in a time of greater certainty. In this sense I believe we can still say thank you to God because what was perhaps only feared is now known to be true. But the people of South Africa have shown their resilience. We should not be tempted to despair. In this moment we must always choose life. The new life that the Gospel offers us is within our reach.

I believe it is fitting that the country is being asked to contemplate this and examine itself and to stand against these vices during our time of Lent.

Let us pray today that we might eradicate all the vices in our own lives, and pray for the strength, courage and conviction to work towards eradicating them in the wider society.

Let us continue to pray for all the beneficiaries of the Social Grant – that they might receive what they need and that they might be generously blessed by God.

God promised new life to us – let us now in the silence of our hearts say yes to that new life, thank God for it, and treasure all the gifts he has bestowed upon us. And let us give thanks and pray for the prophets in our lives and in our country at this time.

Amen.

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