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5th Sunday of Lent

Date: Sunday, March 29, 2020 | **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 Jesuit Institute **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 my experience of them. 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, even as we see a huge threat to our life at the moment. The extraordinary actions we as a country are doing at this time are done to save life, so that in these fearful and anxious times, we might look ahead to life after the lockdown, and know that we did everything possible to save each other's lives.

The raising of Lazarus which was our Gospel text this morning 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. We find ourselves, perhaps, in this time, in the tomb of Lazarus, waiting for the Lord. But we are promised today that the dead man Lazarus will come out of the tomb. Jesus says: "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 will have life and have it abundantly. This abundant life is also what he invites Martha to: 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.

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How can we find life at home at the moment? What are the life-giving activities that we can do as families and friends – even while we are physically separated. Can we be patient with each other? Can we call and reach out to those who are alone and let them know that they are remembered. We can all help each other experience the gift of life by small actions of prayer and charity to communicate to each other.

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 life and resurrection are not private matters; 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 endeavour to be righteous and believe Jesus' words, so that we might have life and live it to the full, and share that with others.

At this time, the prayerful support of individuals and communities are needed more than ever as we learn to be Church in a new way. And God's power is seen in how He can still touch each of us, right where we are, even in lockdown.

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 the fear of death and a particular type of resurrection. The news and gradual realisation of the effects of COVID-19 have left many of us anxious, fearful and desperate, fearing for our jobs, our employees, our friends and family. But the nation experienced a mini-'resurrection' in their Spirits as we listened to our president lay out plans that will offer all of us the hope of life.

Out of the hopelessness, doom and gloom that pervaded the country, Cyril Ramaphosa was able to spark a new hope: It was as if we were given new life, and in that, the country too received something very vital, hope.

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But we also have the prophetic utterances of the scientists and doctors and medical staff who have worked tirelessly, along with the journalists who have all worked to help prepare and educate our population so that we can accept that what we have to do is in the interest of each other's lives and the common good.

And hasn't it been marvellous to see the solidarity and generosity in our nation that has been evident in these last days. This crisis 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 and righteous values – such as putting lives ahead of profit, the common good ahead of our selfish need – reminding us of what is most important to God. 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. We are doing things that choose life over death. We can still receive his Spirit today at home. We can encourage and support each other, and feel God's encouragement and support for us, when we pray.

Perhaps I'm stretching this a little, but I felt that perhaps many in the world have been like corpses in their graves watching horrors unfold elsewhere in the world, unable to move or act, and we needed bold leadership to wake us up from our slumber and ask us to take seriously the situation we are in.

Like Mary and Martha saying to Jesus that their friend Lazarus was ill, we too can say to the Lord that our nation's population, our brothers and our sisters, are also, or soon might-be, ill, 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 the world is and we have no option but to join together and fight against it, with the Lord's help. He has blessed our nation with brave doctors and nurses, prophetic politicians, creative leaders, and the, most valuably, the time to still act.

I do believe that what we have seen in the last week is a serious turning point in our history. Our country, like Lazarus, is ill. The Lord has sent prophets in the form of the many men and women who argue that for the common good we must be as still as possible, we must remain where we are. We must listen to them and hear the echoes of the Word of God in what they say, in how they are advocating for the life that is God's gift to us, to all of us.

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I believe it is fitting that the country is being asked to contemplate these readings at home during our time of Lent. God holds out the promise of life to us, and we are not abandoned. For those of us who feel dead already, we need to remind each other of God's love, of our love, for them. As we adapt to life in the coming weeks, we can say as we did in the Psalm this morning, that 'my soul waits for the Lord'. In this time of waiting where we are forced to make a spiritual communion, we yearn to be together again, we yearn to be gathered in community again, but Our Lord is always ready to answer our prayers. And now we wait for him, whilst we wait for this epidemic to pass.

Let us pray today for all the medical staff and those in essential services who are working hard to keep our Society functioning whilst we wait at home.

Let us pray today for all the sick, in South Africa, and around the world, that they might receive the care and support they need.

Let us pray for our children and grand-parents, who will obviously feel alone at this time. Let us pray that the Lord might show his face and shower his love upon them.

Let us also remember families, and all those who love each other, that the Spirit's gifts of patience and fortitude be especially there's at this time.

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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