



March 25, 2012 Fifth Sunday of Lent—Life

"I am the Resurrection and the Life...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"—John 11:25-26

One of the options that the Liturgy gives us is to read from the Gospel of John on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent. This is especially encouraged at the liturgies where, with the elect, we celebrate the scrutinies—the examination and prayers preparing them for Christian Initiation. This is because John's Gospel is seen by the Church as a type of baptismal catechism. With our elect for the next few weeks we will hear the stories that invite us to understand who Jesus is and what he means—water, light and life.

Dear Friends:

In the fifth century St Cyril of Alexandria said, "The human race may be compared to spikes of wheat in a field, rising, as it were, from the earth, awaiting their full growth and development, and then in time being cut down by the reaper, which is death."

In today's Gospel passage from John, Martha represents the grieving Christian community. She raises the question, "If Jesus gives us eternal life now, why are believers dying? John's story offers us a challenging response. Like all early Christian community's John's community experienced a faith crises whenever any believer died. Why must we still die?

Martha's faith in Jesus is real but inadequate. "Lord if you had been here my brother would never have died." The community is saying, "If Jesus had not died, rose and ascended to heaven he would still be with us and believers would not die. After all doesn't God give whatever Jesus asks?"

In John's Gospel, Jesus must correct a misunderstanding. He is "Resurrection and life" but resurrection does not mean resuscitation of a corpse. Lazarus died and was raised but will die again. The life Jesus offers is not resuscitation but transformation. Jesus does not abolish death he transcends it. Every time we encounter someone's death we are challenged to believe that Jesus transcends and transforms death.

Jesus asks Martha and us, "Do you believe this?" Her answer represents the heart of our faith, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Our faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until we are able to face physical death with the firm confidence that the promise of eternal life is not simply a pledge of some future resurrection at the end of time.

Eternal life is a present and continuous sharing in the life of the ever-living Jesus—now and in the very moment of death. Those who believe in Jesus never truly die. Martha's faith is a response to Jesus, not based on seeing her brother raised. Faith is not based on proofs but on our relationship with Jesus.

I want to conclude with a quote from Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (who was murdered by a military death squad in El Salvador). Msgr. Romero is using Jesus' own image (from John) of the seed that dies.

"To each one of us Christ is saying: if you want your life and mission to be fruitful like mine, do as I. Be converted into a seed that let's itself be buried. Let yourself be killed. Do not be afraid. Those who shun suffering will remain alone. No one is more alone than the selfish. But if you give your life out of love for others, as I give mine for all, you will reap a great harvest."

Peace,

Fr Ron