

Fifth Sunday of Easter, A – May 10, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am Livestreamed Mass (COVID-19) – 800 words

This Sunday's gospel is perhaps the most-often chosen among the options for funeral liturgies. I think it speaks to people on multiple levels: first and foremost, because of the dwelling place that awaits us in the Father's house that it mentions; but also, because of Christ's teaching that he is the way, the truth, and the life – just as the deceased had followed him, so we who remain must also, in order to make it to that place in the Father's house. But then there is also Thomas's question, which resonates with us at times: "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" For it happens frequently enough, walking, as we are, "by faith, and not by sight", and often not seeing clearly where God is leading, that we feel uncertain about where we are headed and whether we are on the right path to make it there.

This gospel comes to us this year at a particularly important time, for we have now been through some eight weeks of quarantine or lockdown and are now in the process of trying prudently to transition back to a more normal way of life. But the threat of pandemic still remains, and for some more than others, that threat provokes great fear. Yes, we have all had to face our mortality during this time and ask ourselves certain questions: Am I going to die? Am I ready to die? What will my death be like? How will it affect those I leave behind? Am I on the right path? Will I arrive at the Father's house?... And as we work through these questions, something remains in the back of our minds: namely, the knowledge that whether from this pandemic or from some other cause, we will all die – and we know neither when nor how.

Today's responsorial psalm offers us a word of reassurance: "See," the psalmist says, "the eyes of the Lord are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness, to deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine." As I often preach at funerals, Christ has indeed gone to prepare a place for us – but that does not mean he has left us here alone as orphans. No, he is with us also; his eyes are upon us, who "fear him" – not with the fear that provokes terror, but with that reverential fear that is a gift of the Holy Spirit, that leads us to want to love God as he deserves and seek to please him. If we live in his sight with that holy fear, he will deliver us, come what may. It would be a holy thing, as we approach and prepare for the feast of Pentecost, to pray for an increase of the gift of fear of the Lord.

Will I experience a painful death from COVID19, alone in a hospital? Will I die some years from now from cancer or a serious heart problem? Will I die peacefully in my sleep? Will my family or friends be gathered around me when I die?... All questions that I cannot answer. The only thing that I can be certain of is: I will die – I know neither when nor how! We must all make our peace with death. If we are following Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life"; that is, if we are following his way by obeying his moral law and taking up our crosses, living in the truth, and living with his life in our souls (in the state of grace) – then we are headed toward the Father's house. Then his eyes are upon us and he will deliver us. Then we truly need not be afraid of the what and how of the certainty that we will die.

Preparing for death is not easy, but it is necessary. The various responses to this present pandemic have highlighted the fact that many of us simply are not ready for it. But see the Lord's mercy: he permits things like this to befall us as wakeup calls, as second chances. Imagine if he did not, and consequently, we never faced our fears and truly got ourselves ready! So our readings this week, I think, really challenge us, especially as we now look at our transition back to a more normal life: How will it be different? And specifically, how will I be more ready and strive always to "live ready" from now on. Maybe I had not taken it so seriously in the past. And perhaps I am still quite afraid. But at least now, I might take the need to confront that fear more seriously, seeking the Lord's grace to overcome it and be ready.