

Fifth Sunday of Lent, A – March 26, 2023 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

When our Lord began his public ministry and started speaking about his future Resurrection and ours, this was not an unknown concept among his listeners. We see this from certain passages of the gospel where groups like the Pharisees were arguing in favor of a resurrection and the Sadducees were denying it. And thus we also see that although the crowds certainly had some familiarity with the concept, there was not at that time in Judaism a consolidated teaching on the resurrection of the body with a consensus surrounding it.

Indeed, as we go back through the Old Testament, we see the roots of this varied belief. There were passages like the one from Ezekiel in the first reading that spoke of the valley of dry bones that would receive flesh and spirit again and return to life; and passages in Isaiah, Daniel, and others that also spoke of a coming-to-life again. Many took these prophecies to be an allegory of Israel's restoration more than a literal resurrection of the body at the end of time. Thus the variations between groups in whether they accepted the teaching or not.

And so we also see throughout the gospels how many in the crowds and among the religious authorities who were initially open to Christ and his message, hoped that he would be a political Messiah who would defeat Israel's enemies in some definitive way and establish it firmly as a glorified nation. Being flesh and blood, our interests and hopes are often weighed down and do not go much beyond the confines of this material world. We struggle with that dichotomy between flesh and spirit of which Saint Paul spoke in the second reading.

Our Lord does not want to establish us permanently here in a two-class system – with us among the saved and all others permanently subjugated around us. No, he wants to bring everyone equally to glory, and death is the passage to it. He triumphed over death, and if we die alive in the Spirit, he will bring us through death to everlasting life – and will raise us up again at the end of time and establish us in a new heavens and a new earth. What that will look like is very shrouded in mystery – “eye has not seen” – but we believe and hope in it firmly.

And so we see how miracles in the gospels like the raising of Lazarus and of the others whom Jesus caused to come to life again were a teaching tool for him, to help purify the beliefs of all who heard him. Both principal groups – Pharisees and Sadducees – needed to be disabused of any hope in a merely earthly political conquest. And all needed to come to see that the resurrection was something we await at the end of time, when time will yield fully to eternity and all will be not merely restored to its former condition but re-created in glory by God.

Yes, even though Lazarus and the others were only brought back to life on this earth and would have to die again, these miracles that Christ worked demonstrated his power over death and were a sign of his own future Resurrection and ours. He worked to purify their beliefs and prepare them for what he would accomplish in his own person – and what we will commemorate in about two weeks' time during the Triduum; indeed, what we commemorate and share in in a real way at every Holy Mass. The Eucharist is a pledge of our future resurrection.

In this regard, the Catechism quotes a Church Father of the 2nd century, St. Irenaeus. He said, “Just as bread that comes from the earth, after God's blessing has been invoked upon it, is no longer ordinary bread, but Eucharist...”, that is, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, “so too”, he continues, “our bodies, which partake of the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but possess the hope of resurrection.” The Eucharist is Jesus himself, alive forevermore, and gradually transforming us as we journey toward our own death and future resurrection.

How important it is, then, that we strive always to live in the Spirit, with a lively faith, hope, and charity, alive to God by being in the state of grace – not only so that we can receive the Holy Eucharist worthily, but also be found in that state when the Lord comes to call us home.

Then, we shall face our judgment and be given our reward. Our bodies will return to dust while our souls proceed, we pray, to glory. And, at the fulfillment of God's plan for Creation and the conclusion of history, when the heavenly trumpet sounds, our bodies will rise again.

No, we do not know what this will look like exactly, but faith gives us access to the mystery and hope enables us to grasp it firmly. And charity is the key that unlocks the gates of heaven. If you have not yet received the Sacrament of Reconciliation during this Lent, I warmly invite you to do so, either here or in another local parish; there is still time! And let's all be sure to receive this great sacrament often, so that we can continue growing in God's charity – growing in the Spirit – and so truly be ready for the good things he has prepared for us all.

In fact, each good confession is not unlike the raising of Lazarus, for we enter the booth spiritually dead or dying, but we leave invigorated and renewed with God's grace, brought back to the fullness of life by Christ himself. What happened to Lazarus and the others in the gospels in a physical way happens to us spiritually when we confess our sins and receive absolution from the priest. What a great gift this is, and itself a sign of our future resurrection! May we all experience this gift often and so always be alive in the Spirit, ready for our Lord.