

Lent 5th Sunday (A)

17th March 2024

‘Hints of resurrection’

Ezek 37: *I shall raise you from your graves, my people.*

Ps 129: *If you, O Lord, were to mark our guilt, who would survive?*

Rom 8: *He who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also.*

Jn 11: 1–45: the raising of Lazarus

I think that by now you know the scene ... Our Lenten Sundays have charted in some way the key moments of the OT, the great covenantal promises of God to Israel, increasingly demonstrating to them the power and the faithfulness of His divine Love. So: **1st Sunday, Noah** and the Flood, resolved in the rainbow and in the promise not to destroy man in his sinfulness. **2nd Sunday, Abraham**, who became “the father of many nations” through his saved son, Isaac, whom Abraham was willing to sacrifice, if that had been God’s will — but it was not; God formed Israel His people out of the family of Abraham, “our father in faith.” **3rd Sunday**, and it was on to **Moses**: leading God’s people out of Egypt, through the rigours and grumblings in the wilderness, and into the Covenant of Mt Sinai with the teaching of the Law and the sacrificial rituals of the Tabernacle. **4th Sunday**, last week, and we had the beginning of the high-point of Israel’s monarchy,

the choosing of **David**, even when he was still a youth outminding the sheep, and his anointing at the hands of the prophet Samuel. But this was not enough, this was not the end-point ... there was so much still to come from God to prove Himself to us, and give Himself to us, in a greater and greater show of covenantal Love; the later prophets are given by God to reveal this, over and over again. **Today**, then, in a short but beautiful passage, **Ezekiel** (early-6th c. BC) is given to proclaim to Israel ‘hints of resurrection,’ we might call them: “*you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, My people. And I shall put My spirit in you, and you will live ...*” ‘Hints of Resurrection’ point forward to a new covenant no longer written on tablets of stone, but written on hearts of flesh, flesh that can be raised and that will be taken up one day to glory and become the perfect (re)union of man with God. Ezekiel’s prophecy, then, is a powerful hint, sown so many centuries before Jesus, that in Him God will indeed raise us up.

So we leap forward to the Gospel today, the third of

the three Lenten mega-Gospel-passages from John that we've had over recent Sundays — Jn 4, Jn 9, Jn 11 — a third encounter of Jesus which allows Him to reveal Himself, to teach faith, and so to deepen faith. On the past two Sundays in the Gospel, first the Samaritan woman, and then the man born blind, at least recognise *“I see you are a prophet, sir,”* but it is Jesus Himself who has had to say to them that He is the Messiah: *“I who am speaking to you, I AM He.”* But now, today, He is here amongst dear and hospitable friends, at the home of Martha, Mary & Lazarus, and they've known Him well through His ministry. Martha already knows the truth in her heart: *“I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who was to come into this world.”* She does not need to be told this; but even so she wavers when they are about to roll the stone away from the tomb on the 4th day after her brother's death. Jesus's words to Martha, to reassure her, to reassure us all — compatriots with her in the Kingdom of Hope-in-Jesus — resound down the ages with a majesty and an authority unparalleled in human history: *“I am the Resurrection and*

the Life. If anyone believes in Me, even though he die, he will live, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.” Jesus's raising of Lazarus must have increased Martha's already-devout personal faith enormously; and so many others — bystanders and others from Bethany and Jerusalem who heard of it — came to believe in Him with this miracle.

The *resuscitation* of Lazarus back to (mortal) life demonstrates without doubt the supreme power that Jesus has over life and death. It is a glorious sign (but *only a sign*) of the coming Resurrection of Jesus at Easter: this 5th Sunday of Lent, then, points us ahead to the joy and wonder of Easter Day in 2 wks' time. But it is also a good reminder that even now (*even in this life* — not just after death) Jesus can start to raise us up. He does this by *raising us up out of our sins*. This is, in fact, the 'first resurrection.' How can we rise again at the last day if we have not let Jesus raise us up here on earth? Sometimes the moment someone dies people are prone to say, “Well, they're now in heaven,” as if their sins and the

consequences of their sins magically disappear. This is not the Catholic faith: the Catholic faith is that we first need a purification of our sins when we die. As a result, we ourselves pray for, and offer Mass for, the repose of the souls of those who have died. And just as importantly we have a mind for the condition of our souls in this life, *not in fear*, but in thanksgiving that Jesus can already release us of our sins here on earth: this is the real raising to life that we receive here, and this is what prepares us properly for the raising to life after death.

St Paul said, a few lines before that passage we heard in the 2nd reading, *It is death to limit oneself to what is unspiritual* (v. 6), so let's take courage from the spiritual resuscitation which Jesus is offering us: to call us out of the dark cave of shame, to raise us up and on to our feet, leaving the paralysing bandages of our sins behind. Note that Lazarus *cannot unbind Himself*: only from the outside can He be released. Nor can we forgive our own sins; we need Jesus's Word, His power as God, to speak that word of forgiveness. In the two weeks remaining

between now and Easter, if you haven't already been recently, let's each commit to availing ourselves of a contrite and heartfelt Confession — whether here at Newman House, or at your home parish, or in another of the many local Catholic churches round about. St Paul encourages us in that 2nd Reading, weaving together the power of Jesus to forgive sins, and the power of Jesus to raise us to eternal life — these are two aspects of His one salvation of us: “*Though your body may be dead, it is because of sin, but if Christ is in you then your spirit is life itself because you have been justified; and if the spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then He who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit living in you.*”

So, let's commit and prepare to be freed of our sins this Lent; let's have Jesus say to us in Confession this Passiontide those happy and grace-filled and resurrection words, *Unbind him, let him go free! Unbind her, let her go free!*