

Sermon for 2nd April 2017

The Lenten season as we know is a time simple living, self-reflection, fasting and prayer in order to grow closer to God. In our parish there are study groups that meet at different times and places so that many parishioners can be accommodated and participate, and there are those who study by themselves in their homes.

The journey through these days imitate two wilderness episodes of spiritual testing in the Bible: the 40 years of wilderness wandering by the Israelites, and the temptation of Jesus after he spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness.

This time therefore can have its ups and downs as we travel through our own wilderness story and it may well be helpful to hold in our hearts especially at this late time in lent, the eternal truth that God is everywhere, all around us, constantly reaching out to us, even in the most unlikely situations in everyday life and in the more familiar ones in the sacrament and scripture.

In the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel today, we hear a summary of Ezekiel's mission to the exiles. He prophesies that God will bring new life to a dead Israel.

The bones that are scattered on the ground are bleached, and very, very dry. These represent the total destruction of Israel by an attacking army. No reference to the rising of individuals from death is intended in this story. The vision rather relates to the raising of a nation.

Ezekiel is to summon the spirit where there is no spirit present. The passage finally climaxes when God himself declares it My spirit, God's spirit that will enter the dead. The divine initiative stands out clearly in this passage.

The psalm is an individual lament which journeys forth from pleading for relief from distress, to trusting in Yahweh's forgiveness and then on further to an address to the community about salvation.

In the epistle Paul also speaks of God's spirit living within us. He identifies the Spirit of God with the Spirit of Christ and it is that Spirit within us that will once more give life to our bodies.

In the gospel reading we hear the story about the raising of Lazarus by Jesus. Much is made about the fact that Lazarus had been dead for 4 days when his tomb was opened.

The crowd who were present at the tomb, for many had come to console Mary and Martha, more than likely would have been familiar with the early rabbinical tradition, that the soul hovers by the grave for three days in the hope of reunion with the body, but at the first sign of decomposition it departs for the certainty of death is then obvious.

The gospel writer ensures that there is no room for doubt at the tomb of Lazarus - Lazarus was indeed dead when Jesus raised him to life.

We read also in the gospel that after Lazarus was raised from the dead many came out from Jerusalem to see him.

They would have been familiar with the scripture from Ezekiel about the spirit of God raising the nation from death to life but this was very different. This was the raising of an individual. This miracle spoke about a newness of life in a very personal way.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a climax in the series of signs.

In the previous chapters of John's gospel, Jesus has been portrayed as the fountain of living water, as the light of the world, as the good shepherd of the sheep and now with the raising of Lazarus, as the resurrection and the life.

Jesus is therefore, the supreme gift from God to humanity in both life and death.

In life Jesus shows clearly that he feels with us and for us. He weeps at the tomb of Lazarus and the same deep cry of anguish is heard after his entrance into Jerusalem. He knows firsthand what it is like to grieve, to suffer anguish, and to wait upon God.

In the resurrection he has won the victory over the finality of death and the grave.

There is much reassurance that we can take from today's gospel story. In terms of our Lenten journey as we come closer to the cross of Christ - through the ups and downs, the ins and outs of our own wilderness, there is one life giving message that stands out. And this is that we can trust in the spirit of Jesus Christ in a very personal way - to be with us completely in all times - to give new life in this life and in the next.

The lord be with you.

Pray the Collect together.