

Lent 5th Sunday (A)

29th March 2020

‘Longing to have Jesus call us out of the ‘tomb’ ’

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

It’s certainly a strange experience to be writing a homily that I will not deliver, at least, not in the customary manner to the church full of parishioners at this crucial stage of late Lent. We are not used to this state of affairs, and it is a painful thing, to have to endure the suspension of the public life and worship of the Church. Back in the early 13th c. (23rd March 1208 – 2nd July 1214), the Pope placed England under an ‘interdict’ for over 6yrs, suspending Mass and all the sacraments save baptism and the confession of the dying. Then after the Reformation in England, in the 16th–17th c., Catholics were rarely able to attend Mass unless they were invited to a clandestine Mass being celebrated in secret in the home of a wealthy Catholic recusant family — the penal laws were only abolished in 1839! Those were hard times, and although we won’t have to wait years or centuries for the restoration of the Mass to us, yet we feel acutely and with great sadness this time of ‘fasting’ from

Mass. This Lent is proving to be a harder, more-sacrificial time, than any Lent we’ve known in our lifetimes. And we know that it will not end any time soon — we’ll still be in this time of ‘fasting from Mass’ come Easter Sunday when we would rather set about feasting and celebrating the triumph of Jesus in the joyous Mass of the Resurrection. We know for what good we do all this ‘giving up’ this year — it’s part of our civic duty, along with the other current restrictions on public life, employment, and liberty — but that doesn’t make it any easier, and we are, many of us I’m sure, feeling ‘all at sea,’ and somewhat disoriented; perhaps not knowing quite what to spend our time doing.

Into this confusion of our lives and our Lent we have today’s great Gospel from Jn 11 — the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the third of the three, long, Lenten passages from St John: a third encounter with Jesus which allows Him to reveal Himself and so to deepen faith. In the previous weeks, first the Samaritan woman and then the man born blind, at least say “*I see you are a prophet, sir,*” but Jesus Himself has to say to them that He is the Messiah:

“I who am speaking to you, I AM He.” But here He is amongst friends, Martha, Mary & Lazarus. And Martha already feels in her heart: *“You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who was to come into this world.”* But she probably wasn’t quite ready for the spectacular demonstration of His power over life and death that He enacted then and there before her eyes. Jesus’s raising of Lazarus must have increased Martha’s faith, and indeed many others came to believe in Him with this miracle. This resuscitation of Lazarus back to life is a sign of the coming glorious Resurrection of Jesus Himself. But it is 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. In fact, how can we rise again at the last day if we have not let Jesus raise us up here on earth? Let’s take courage from the spiritual life which Jesus is offering us: to raise us up and on to our feet, leaving the bandages of our sins behind. Let’s have Jesus say to us those happy words, *Unbind him, let him go free!*

We may feel at this moment in history that, along

with a huge portion of the world suffering with us the effects of the virus outbreak, we are bound in a dark and small place, restricted and weighed down heavily with the fear of human frailty and mortality. Perhaps we feel like Lazarus in his tomb, that the threat of darkness and death is upon us. Yet, in fact, it was the light and life of Jesus that was imminently to fall upon Lazarus — and can be upon us, too. As we enter this most poignant part of Lent — Passiontide (Lent wk 5 + Holy Week) — let’s be joined in prayer with the suffering Jesus, as He moves lovingly towards that event that will shower Risen light, and Eternal life upon us: Easter! It is for our own release from death, from the shadows of fear and frailty, that Jesus is going to His death: only He can offer us this Resurrection! Those who witnessed Lazarus’s resuscitation recognised the sign: that the Lord had it in Him to bring life and light where darkness and death seemed to reign. In these extraordinary and perplexing days, let’s pray daily with the faith of St Martha, to see our society acknowledge that only in Jesus is there true hope for healing, resurrection, and happiness.