

The Resurrection and the Life

By Nina Sophie Heereman, SSD

March 29, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

Readings: Ezekiel 37.12-14; Romans 8.8-11; John 11.1-45

“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Lk 24.25-26). As he talks with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus speaks as though it were crystal clear that the entire mystery of his death and resurrection has been foretold by the Jewish Scriptures. But the two disciples, like many Christian readers throughout the ages, struggle to see how this could be so evident.

Resurrection and the Return from Exile

The first reading for the fifth Sunday in Lent (Ezek 37.12-14) gives us a fine example of a prophetic text that could be readily understood as speaking not only about Christ’s death and resurrection, but also of our own. “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (Ezek 37.12). Such is God’s explicit promise this Sunday through the mouth of the prophet. In Ezekiel’s time, God was addressing the people of Israel living in exile far away from their homeland. Serving the Babylonians as slaves, they felt buried alive. In fact, the Old Testament understands the destruction of the Temple and the deportation of the king and people to Babylon as Israel’s symbolic death. The drama of our first parents had repeated itself. Like them, Israel had been given a paradise of a land in which to enjoy abundant life in God’s presence in the Temple. There was just one condition: observance of God’s law, which is exactly what the people refused. Just as Adam and Eve, driven from the presence of God, had found themselves East of Eden, Israel, too, had been driven out of the Promised Land towards the East (see Genesis 3.24). Although physically alive in their exile, the people were spiritually dead. Their promised liberation and return to their own country was thus like a resurrection from their Babylonian tomb.

This promise seemed fulfilled when King Cyrus decreed the Jews’ return to Jerusalem (see Ezr 1.1-4). Nevertheless, Ezekiel clearly foresaw another resurrection, one of which the return from exile was but a powerful symbol. After all, it takes no outpouring of God’s Spirit to return to one’s homeland. Many other nations were ordered to do the same under Cyrus. Rather, Ezekiel sees the return to the Promised Land as symbolizing another, more fundamental resurrection that God will bring about through the gift of his own spirit. The return from exile stands for the very resurrection spoken of in the second reading and the Gospel: the resurrection of our mortal bodies by the power of the Holy Spirit, the definitive resurrection prefigured by the raising of Lazarus. In the previous chapter of Ezekiel, the gift of the spirit is depicted as a sprinkling with water that will cleanse Israel from all its sins and so create in them a new heart. The people will receive a new spirit, the prophet says, divinely empowering them to do what the human will wounded by sin cannot do: to follow God’s commandments and so fulfill the condition *sine qua non* for uninterrupted life in the Promised Land as God’s covenant people (see Ezek 36.25-28). This is the same Spirit we ourselves have received in baptism, the Spirit who conformed us to Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6.3) and cleansed us from original and personal sin. It is also the same Spirit who cleanses us anew in every sacrament we celebrate and every prayer we say.

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Jesus, who has come to restore all things, recapitulates the entire history of Israel in his own flesh. Reading the Scriptures with a mind not blinded by sin, and acting in the full possession of the Holy Spirit, he understands that Israel's exile prefigured his own banishment from the land of the living in expiation for Israel's sin. But in Israel's return from exile, he also recognizes a prefiguration of his own return from the valley of death. Just as God forgave Israel after having expiated her sin in the Babylonian captivity, the Father will also bring Jesus back to life after having expiated humanity's sin in his crucifixion. Jesus' words, "this illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (Jn 11.4), therefore have a double meaning. Yes, Jesus will raise Lazarus from death and so be glorified as "the resurrection and the life." But on a much deeper level, this provisional resurrection of Lazarus will lead to a more dramatic glorification of the Son of God, namely, the revelation of God's glory in his death on the cross. Jesus knows perfectly well that the raising of Lazarus will lead to his own condemnation, as St. John powerfully asserts in the conclusion of this Sunday's gospel (which the lectionary unfortunately cuts short). The resurrection of Lazarus seals the Sanhedrin's decision to put Jesus to death, a decision which unwittingly testifies that Jesus, who indeed raised Lazarus, will raise all those who believe in him thanks to his death in their stead. In the unconsciously prophetic words of the High Priest Caiaphas, Jesus should die for the people of God "so that the whole nation may not perish" (Jn 11.50). The fruit of His death is the life promised to all who believe in him.

In restoring Lazarus to life, Jesus announces his own resurrection, while proving himself to be the author of life endowed with power and authority to give life to whomever he wishes. He is in the truest sense "the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11.25). But his resurrection, like the one he came to give us, is not a simple return to earthly life, as was the case with Lazarus. Lazarus, like all of us, would eventually die a second time (his tomb is found in Larnaca on Cyprus to this day). By contrast, Jesus' resurrected body, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Ezek 37.14), is to die no more.

But Christ hasn't just promised to raise our mortal bodies to eternal life on the last day, as we firmly confess every Sunday in the Creed. Amazingly, he has already raised us to new life in our Baptism. In the baptismal waters, we were both buried with Christ and raised with him through faith in the working of the God who raised Jesus from the dead (see Col 2.12). This is why St. Paul says in the second reading: "if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom 8.10-11). We live in a state of *already and not yet*: our bodies are still subject to mortality, because we still bear the effects of original sin as a penance. And yet, "by virtue of the Holy Spirit" whom we received in our baptism, we are united with Christ and therefore *already* "truly participate in the heavenly life of the risen Christ," even though this life is "hidden with Christ in God" (see Col 3.1). As St. Paul says in another letter: "God has raised us up and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2.6). This is Jesus' message to Martha and to us: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (Jn 11.25-26).

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For Further Reading

- Gary Anderson, [***"Sure and Certain Hope"***](#)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, [***##638-658***](#)
- Fr. John Paul Zeller, [***"The Raising of Lazarus, the Hope of Eternal Life and the Grace of Absolution"***](#)

In Short . . .

- *The Babylonian exile symbolized the death of Israel, while their return from exile was a resurrection from that death.*
- *Ezekiel saw the return to the Promised Land as symbolizing another, more fundamental resurrection that God would bring about through the gift of his own Spirit.*
- *Jesus recapitulated the history of Israel's exile and return in his own death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.*
- *In restoring Lazarus to life, Jesus announced his own resurrection and revealed himself to be the author of life.*
- *Though Christ has promised to raise us to new life on the last day, He has already raised us to life in our baptism. Thus, we live in a state of "already" in our baptism and "not yet" in our hope for the resurrection on the last day.*