

‘Thought for the Day’ – 5th Sunday of Lent, 29 March 2020

Today we find ourselves gathered outside the entrance to a tomb. How appropriate for each of us, who find ourselves ‘entombed’ at home in these harrowing days of the coronavirus! In two week’s time, we’ll be gathered together outside the entrance to another tomb, on Easter Sunday morning. This is the key to understanding our readings today, which all speak of resurrection.

In our Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezechiel, the Lord declares that He will open the graves of His chosen people Israel, will raise them up, and will put His spirit into them – and they shall live.

In his magnificent letter to the early Christian community in Rome, Paul offers words of reassurance to the anxious followers of the Way, and reminds them that “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 own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you.”

Our Gospel passage, from chapter 11 of John, is even more overt, in which Jesus declares himself to be the resurrection and the life. Despite this, the focus is not on him. Rather, we turn towards the deceased inhabitant of the tomb – Jesus’ friend, Lazarus.

In the other three Gospels, there is not even a mention of the raising of Lazarus. However, the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do contain stories of other people who are brought back to life: the daughter of Jairus, or the widow’s son from Nain, for instance. In both of these cases, as biblical scholar William Barclay has pointed out, “the raising followed *immediately* after death... But there is no parallel for the raising of a man who had been dead for four days and whose body had begun to putrefy.”

None of these raisings are akin to the Resurrection of Christ, who emerged from the Easter tomb with an even more glorious body, forever victorious over death. In the case of the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow from Nain, and Lazarus himself, these individuals are not glorified, but they return, rather, to their former lives, and at a later point will die definitively.

So what resurrection are we talking about today? Pope Benedict XVI gives us a succinct answer, stating that “it is not yet that of Jesus, which bursts in as an absolute innovation, but our own resurrection, to which we aspire and which Christ himself gave to us”. Christ, as the Resurrection and the Life, will raise each of us up on the last day, but figuratively he also raises us up from the lethargy of sin, of disbelief, and despair. And despair is something with which we can associate at present. Whenever we sink into this soporific slumber, we die to our spiritual selves, but all is not lost. We can take heart from our conquering Christ, and his defeat of death.

Through the Church and her Sacraments, to which we are presently bereft – but only temporarily – we are given the strength to liberate ourselves, to unbind ourselves, of the spiritual bandages, of all that prevents us from growing in holiness and in deeper imitation of Jesus himself. It is in his Resurrection that we are freed, once and for all. Death may seem like a forbidding wall, which cannot be scaled, and which prevents us from seeing beyond it, yet thanks to Christ that wall is demolished, by the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let us be ever thankful, and always ready to rise spiritually from the challenges of daily life, from our present fears and anxieties, and from our tombs of sin, turning towards the Supreme Liberator himself.