

Homily 29 March 2020 – The Spirit / breath of God gives life.

Death is something we are all faced with from the time we are born. Yet it is something that is dreaded, probably because it is unknown and because of the pain and sorrow that is experienced when a loved one dies. No one has ever experienced death in the sense that they are able to share that experience with others. We may have witnessed death. We may have accompanied a person on their final passage from this life. But what death means and how the one who is dying experiences that moment we can never know. However, each of us experiences “mini” deaths through our lifetime. Flor McCarthy describes some of these in the reflection below:

We are born to die so that we may live more fully.
Everytime we pass from one stage of life to another,
something in us dies and something new is born.
We taste death in moments of loneliness,
rejection, sorrow, disappointment and failure.
We are dying before our time
when we live in bitterness, in hatred, and in isolation.
Each day we are creating our own death by the way we live.
For those with faith, death is not extinguishing the light;
it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.

Currently we, South Africa, along with many other countries worldwide are experiencing isolation because of the lockdown enforced due to the Coronavirus. Death is very near and very real and we are finding out just how difficult is to be separated from family, friends and one another as the body of Christ. We may feel overwhelmed and prone to despair but I am struck by just how relevant and comforting our readings today are. They breathe much needed hope and life into our lives and current situation.

The three readings today – Ezekiel, Romans and John - are all concerned with God's Spirit/ breath that is within each one of us and which brings resurrection to newness of life.

In the first reading, Ezekiel has a vision of a seemingly hopeless situation, yet God restores flesh to the bones and brings them back to life by breathing into them. Similarly, in the letter to the Romans, Paul writes that it is God's Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and it is God's Spirit that lives in us. Thus, our mortal bodies receive life through God's Spirit that dwells in us (v11).

Our Gospel reading from John records the well-known story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. A situation just as seemingly hopeless as the vision Ezekiel has in the Old Testament reading.

In the passage we read, Jesus is told that his dear friend Lazarus is sick. Lazarus' sisters had sent a message to Jesus hoping that he would come and heal their brother. However, Jesus does not drop everything and rush to Lazarus' side either to heal him or to say his last goodbyes. Instead, he stayed where he was for two more days. (In our current situation, we may not even be able to get to attend the funeral of a loved one.) And when he arrives both Mary and Martha say to him (at different times): “Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.” (v21, 32) Is this how we are feeling right now – hurt, disappointed, wondering where God is in our situation? Hear Jesus' words to Mary and Martha – “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?”

We can take heart, dear people of God as we hear Jesus speak these words to us today. May we too believe it and may our faith sustain us during these difficult times. God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and God will surely raise us out of the ashes of our current situation. We will be resurrected to newness of life. We will have learnt not to take each other and life for granted; we will have learnt to appreciate our communal worship and fellowship. Like Lazarus and his sisters, we will have been reminded that our faith in God's love, even during these times of complete disruption of life, as we know it, is well grounded. In the raising of Lazarus, we see God bringing life to the dead out of love so too will we surely know and witness to God's love and life-giving power. (Johannesburg Diocese Children's ministry)

As we take time to reflect on the words of Flor McCarthy, at the beginning of my sermon, my prayer for each of us is that we will know that God has, and will continue to, breathe his breath on us and fill us with life anew. (MP 67 by Edwin Hatch)

Amen