

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT - YEAR A

09 MARCH 2008

First Reading: Ez 37, 12-14

Second Reading: Rm 8,8-11

Gospel: Jn 11: 1-45

BEING TRULY ALIVE!

Now in just two more weeks, we will be celebrating the great feast of Easter! The great feast of Jesus Christ conquering death! The great feast of Jesus Christ giving us all new life! The great feast when so many new Christians here in Zambia and around the world experience the new birth of Baptism!

The readings for this Fifth Sunday of Lent help us in a special way to prepare for the upcoming feast of Easter. Why? Because all three readings speak about the new life coming after death. And to be honest, that's very important these days because all around us here in Zambia we do experience death.

The tragedy of floods in the past month has meant not only loss of maize fields and homes but also loss of many lives. Malaria continues to be the biggest killer in Zambia, especially among children. And thousands die each year – among our relatives, friends, colleagues, church mates – of HIV and AIDS. While more than 16% of Zambians between 15 and 49 are *infected* by HIV and AIDS, 100% of Zambians – all of us – are *affected*!

Because you and I know much about death, we want to know much about life. In the first reading, the Lord speaks through the Prophet Ezekiel to tell us that He is the giver of life, the opener of graves, the One who will put His own spirit within us. Consoling words indeed! St. Paul tells us in the second reading that even if our body is dead because of sin, if the spirit of Christ is really within us then we have true life. Jesus raised from the dead is the promise that our own mortal bodies will have new life.

The Gospel of St. John recounts the beautiful story of how Jesus Christ raises from the dead his good friend Lazarus. But before looking at that story, let's consider some of the ways in which death can daily touch all of us -- not by way of our lives coming to an end but because our *faith*, our *hope* and our *love* is coming to an end.

Many people – maybe even some people who have been coming to our churches on these Sundays of Lent – don't have a very lively *faith*. Or at least they think that their faith is not very alive. But what does faith mean? It means to believe in something that we do not see or hear or touch. We say that we believe in God and God's creative power of everyone around us, all our sisters and brothers. But does that belief show in the way that we live our lives?

Remember that St. James tells us in his Letter in the New Testament that "faith without works is dead"! (James 2: 17) And he specifically mentions that if we see a sister or a brother hungry and simply tell them to go their way with a blessing but no food, then our own faith is as dead as dead can be! But sometimes we may do just that by not demanding effective government policies that support good agricultural efforts to feed the nation, or by not asking our political leaders why they don't pay as much attention to the poor as they do to the rich in our country. Is our faith really alive if we act that way?

Or what about our *hope*, our trust in God's providence to take care of us? Is our hope dead when we spend more time wasting the little money we might have on fancy clothes or lots of beer or tasteless videos or wild parties? No, I certainly don't do all those foolish things! But there might be some other things that I should examine my life-style about, to see whether my hope in God's loving care is still alive and well. Each of us could spend some time today, or this coming week, simply asking ourselves where our hope is, in whom our hope is, and why we have hope?

And then there is *love*, the most important sign of life within each of us. Do we truly love our God with our whole heart, mind, strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves? How is that love shown in very practical ways around us? Do we forgive members of our families who might have offended us in small ways or even in large ways? Do we fight against any stigma being shown to those who are HIV-positive? Are we free of the kind of corruption in government or business that hurts so many people, especially the poor?

Do we only vote for politicians who love people by being totally honest and hard-working, really serving the common good of all the people of Zambia? The Bemba proverb states, "Umuti usuma baumwena ku fisabo" (A good tree is seen through the fruit it produces).

Yes, there are many ways that love can be alive and active. If I find that my love is dying, I need to ask Jesus to enliven it, bring it back to life, by sending His Holy Spirit in these days leading up to Easter!

And that is why the story in St. John's Gospel today is so consoling for each of us. Jesus deeply loved his friend Lazarus and their sisters Mary and Martha. They say that the shortest sentence in the Bible is found in this story: "Jesus wept!" He wept to learn of the death of his friend, Lazarus. And he uses his divine power to bring Lazarus back to life. And truly, Jesus also weeps to know of our death because of sin and selfishness. And Easter is a reminder that he wants to bring us out of the graves of our death to experience, with him, really new life!

When we celebrate Easter this year of 2008, it would be a wonderful gift to our nation Zambia if all of us Christians, when we renew our Baptismal vows, would also renew our commitment to work for the good of the whole country. If we ask Jesus to raise up us from any spots of death and if we promise to be truly alive if our faith, hope and love, then our Lenten Season will truly have been a good preparation for the new life of Easter!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- In what way does my life-style show that I have faith in God apart from simply going to church?
- Where is my hope and in whom is my hope and why do I have hope?
- Can I identify anything that prevents me from putting into practice my love of God and love of my neighbour?

SKETCH

Have someone act as a dedicated Christian who attends mass everyday. However, he does not speak to his sister who has AIDS because he believes she is sinful. Later he realises that being a Christian demands being inclusive. He rejects stigma and begins to lovingly visit his sister. There is now real peace and love between them.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- Lord, we pray that our faith may be accompanied by good works, especially works that lead to social justice, reconciliation and peace. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray for the courage to challenge actions that hurt many people, actions such as corruption, stigma shown to AIDS patients and bad policies by government leaders, so that human dignity may be promoted.. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray that this Easter 2008 will be a time of renewed life for our families, small Christian communities, church and all of Zambia. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*