

**First Impressions**     FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A)  
Ezekiel 37: 12-14   Psalm 130   Romans 8: 8-11   John 11: 1-45  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's readings are about dying and being raised from the dead. But what kind of dying and what kind of rising? Are we talking about physical dying and then being restored to life back where we left off? Of course not, because death takes many forms and so does life.

The people Ezekiel addressed were alive, but they were as good as dead and buried because they were a shattered and captive nation; they were exiles in Babylon. On their own, they had no future and no hope of restoration. At least, not on their own. Just prior to today's section the prophet gave his vision of "dry bones" (37:1-12). Today's reading concludes that vision. "Dry bones" strewn on a desert landscape was an appropriate image for what the people felt—despair and lifeless. They lived in a foreign land and could no longer call themselves a people and they lacked the resources to do anything about it. We know people like that: a death or serious illness has changed their lives dramatically and they despair about the future. At a parish a woman shares her story about her husband's death and she is still attempting to settle his business affairs three year later; a father tells of his son in a hospital in the Midwest being treated for wounds he received in Iraq. There are many ways we are locked into graves and yet still have physical life.

But the prophet tells us today that when God is involved, nothing is hopeless. God makes a promise, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back to the land of Israel." God did fulfill that promise and the people were brought back home. They were raised from their graves and they, who were no-people, became a new people through the Spirit of God. Death and its manifestations affect even those who are still physically alive. But, the prophet assures us, God has power over death in all its forms. Which is what John tells us in today's gospel.

The evangelist opens his story by telling us, "a man was ill." It is as if John is first telling us about "a person"—any person/all people. This is another long story in this gospel because it is an important one and has serious consequences for Jesus. It will precipitate his death. He will give Lazarus life, but at the cost of his own. We have an illness that can lead to death; indeed, we may be dead even though we wake up in the morning, go to school, work, clean the house, drop off the kids at

soccer, etc. We need someone to call us out of our graves and to give our spirits life, just as the people in Ezekiel's time needed God to raise them from their graves.

After the brief general introduction, John makes the story concrete. The man's name is Lazarus, and he is in Bethany. Lazarus, the name means "God helps." Bethany means, "House of Affliction." This is our story and the story of our world and we need God's help in our "house of affliction." Something very good is about to happen in the House of Affliction. Not just for Lazarus and those surrounding him, but for us all.

The story goes from bad to worse: Lazarus isn't just sick, he is dead. And the death is complete. Jews believed that the soul hovered around the body for three days; this is the fourth day. The body has been wrapped in burial clothes, anointed with spices and placed in the tomb. The funeral is over--that's that--nothing more can be done but grieve and plan a life without a loved one.

If Jesus had gotten to Lazarus before he died, he could have cured him. Lazarus, beloved by his family and friends—and by Jesus---would not have died and Jesus' reputation as a healer would have been enhanced. But Jesus is more than a healer who, for a while, keeps people from dying. We don't need someone to keep us alive a little longer, as much as we need someone to give us eternal life—now and in the future. Jesus reveals the God of life to us, the One who has power over death—the greatest and last enemy we face. Jesus doesn't put death off for a while; he conquers death. Not just death with a big "D"—but the many deaths and graves we face while we live.

Death is a powerful enemy, not just because it takes us at the end of our lives; it exerts its power over us throughout our lives. We experience death in too many forms to name. For example: wars have left scars for generations; poverty sucks the life out of families, neighborhoods and nations; conflicts divide Christians and set religions against one another; rivalries and ambition among church people give scandal to outsiders; rancor rips apart families; the innocent are abused, political corruption in poor countries further deplete resources, etc. Death deals us a powerful hand and we humans, when we are on our own, come out on the losing side in our House of Affliction.

Jesus arrives when there is no doubt Lazarus is dead. (When he orders the stone removed from the tomb Martha advises him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." That's how dead he is!) Martha is the first-

person Jesus speaks with and she tells him that he should have come sooner to prevent this tragedy. “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of God.” I doubt she knew just how much Jesus was about to do. She seems to trust that Jesus could have done the right thing and maybe might do the right thing now—whatever he does. Martha knows Jesus is special, but she doesn’t know how special. A lot of the world honors Jesus and looks upon him as a great spiritual teacher, an inspirational leader. But he is more than that and these weeks of Lent invite us to affirm the faith we will profess at our Easter Vigil service.

Martha and Jesus’ conversation about the resurrection is important, it is central to this passage and a key to the gospel. She acknowledges a faith in the resurrection that was still new at the time and not professed by all of her contemporaries—especially the Sadducees. “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” That is what most of us would say is our faith. Our resurrection is going to happen at some future date when we will rise from the dead. What we have in the present is our hope that we will rise and so we wait and live in that hope.

However, Jesus’ response to Martha goes further than what she professes. “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he/she dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” It isn’t just that the resurrection will take place at some future time, as Martha believes, but that Jesus has come to give us life here and now. The resurrection is a present tense experience, as well as our future hope.

We are at an important point in our story. It is where our faith lies. Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the tomb will confirm this conversation with Martha. Lazarus’ resuscitation gives us reason to place our trust in Jesus’ words to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life... everyone who believes in me will never die. Jesus isn’t just promising that we will be resurrected to new life in the future; but that right now he is calling us out of our graves to give us life—right now.

When someone we love dies, our life ends too. At a funeral Jesus’ words are consoling; not just as a reassurance that our loved one lives with God, but for all of us left behind. He promises that we will be raised out of the graves of our grief and loss and given new life. Faith in Jesus’ words keeps us from giving up after a great loss. Which makes us wonder if religion hasn’t put too much emphasis on reward in the next life and under emphasized or neglected the eternal life we have now with Christ. We not only need life later; we need life now. We need to hear Jesus calling us to rise from our graves, the dead places we find ourselves. What would it mean to live as resurrected people?

When we hear Jesus' call, it doesn't mean just a resuscitation with energy to go back to the way things have always been. That's not what having divine life here and now means. That's the old life, not the new life we are preparing to celebrate this Easter. With Christ's life in us now, we have a new self-discipline with which to overcome addictions and encrusted habits; a freedom and new confidence in our prayer; a deeper commitment and self-giving to Christ in our daily life; more availability to the needs of others and a freer spirit that comes with the forgiveness we have received. Of course, we look forward to full life and communion with Christ in the future. But our focus is on the here and now, for we have been called out of our graves and already given Christ's new and abundant life. Now is the time to share that life with the world. The resurrection is present tense.

#### **REMINDER:**

Fr. Chuck Dahm, OP has written short homilies for the Sundays of Lent. They have a strong social justice cast and each homily has an accompanying Prayer of the Faithful. Go to our "Preachers' Exchange" webpage and click on Justice Preaching. Or go directly to:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com/justicepreaching.htm>

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

#### **Stations of the Cross for Today**

The Lenten Stations of the Cross offer a rich opportunity to see Jesus, suffering today in our world. Many of our brothers and sisters walk the way of the Cross continuing the suffering of Jesus in their lives. We are all called to be the Simons of Cyrene or Veronicas today, knowing that what we lovingly do for each other, we truly do to Him.

#### **1st Station - Pilate Condemns Jesus to Death**

Pray for those on death row and work to end to death penalty.

#### **2nd Station - Jesus Takes Up His cross**

Encourage a family member, or friend who is suffering.

#### **3rd Station - Jesus Falls the First Time**

Prepare a meal for someone who is ill or homeless.

#### **4th Station - Jesus Meets His Mother**

Lend a listening ear to a friend in need.

**5th Station - Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross**

Make a contribution of time or money to a parish ministry.

**6th Station - Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus**

Volunteer your time at a food bank, soup kitchen, or serve a Wake Interfaith Hospitality Network or Moore Square meal.

**7th Station - Jesus Falls a Second time**

Vote for legislation for a living wage. Offer kindness and respect to those who do minimum wage jobs.

**8th Station - Jesus Talks with the Women**

Offer assistance to a single parent, or visit an elderly neighbor.

**9th Station - Jesus Falls a Third Time**

Pray for families and victims of HIV/AIDS.

**10th Station - Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments**

Boycott businesses that use sweatshop labor to manufacture clothing.

**11th Station - Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross**

Write to legislators in Congress to ban land mines and other weapons which target civilians.

**12th Station - Jesus Dies on the Cross**

Pray for the victims of violence. Pray for those who do violence. Pray for those who support violence.

**13th Station - Jesus Is Placed in the Arms of His Mother**

Turn off your television when violent shows come on.

**14th Station - Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb**

Visit someone who is home-bound or in a nursing home.

**"We adore you Oh Christ and we bless you,  
because by Your holy cross, you have redeemed the world."**

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart

Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## READER'S RESPONSE

(The Samaritan Woman----John 4: 5-42, Third Sunday of Lent)

NOON in John's gospel connects with his great theme of light and darkness. Nicodemus had come at night; this woman comes in the brightest part of the day!!! What does that say about her openness to Jesus' message? She was already in the light, already open.

The story is multi-layered. The 5 husbands are also the 5 tribes that the Assyrians brought in when they conquered Samaria. The Israelites intermarried with them - and took on their gods as well. This was their idolatry and their adultery. (I think this story is in Kings somewhere).

Another theme in John is that of marriage, bridegroom, etc. Jesus here is God the bridegroom come to claim the bride, which is ANCIENT ISRAEL. Samaria is where the early Israelites (patriarchs) had their sacred shrines, the well of Jacob, etc.

A well is the meeting place of bride and groom in the OT.... These themes say so much more than that the woman was a woman of ill repute who was embarrassed to dip for water at the same time as other women...

Deanna Rose von Barga, rscj

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Glenn E. Chapman#0072845 (On death row since 11/16/94)

Daniel Cummings #0095279 (12/16/94)

Marvin Williams 30443375 (1/25/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**

**“Liturgical year A,”** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**“Liturgical years, A, B and C,”** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process.

Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

## **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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