

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent (A)
Written by Bishop Robert P. Deeley, J.C.D.
March 29, 2020
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Portland
Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11: 1-45

Good morning. I want to thank Monsignor Dubois for his willingness to take my place as celebrant of this Mass today. I appreciate his kindness as well in sharing with you my thoughts in this homily. It is a way in which I can speak with you. During this week, I have been trying to shake a cold which won't disappear. Being cautious as we are called to be, I wanted to keep those in the Cathedral safe this morning. As such, I thought it best to stay home. Please don't worry about me. I am just being cautious until I can get rid of this cold.

As the coronavirus situation continues, I want to tell you that I am edified by your cooperation with the efforts made to contain the virus and your efforts to be present to each other in the midst of our social distancing. As I listened during the week to pastors, parish staffs, and my own phone calls, I know that what is particularly challenging for all of us in this time is the loss of the Eucharist. The online Masses are a wonderful way to gather. Yet, even though it is a grace to be together, it is hard not to be able to receive Holy Communion. Many have said that this is a great loss, and it is. At the same time, I think we can understand that it is necessary. I read an article this week which helped me to understand that better. It was written by a medical doctor who attends Mass every Sunday, but he understands and sees why this action is necessary. He yearns for the Mass and the experience of God's love in receiving communion, but he sees the wisdom of doing what we have done. In his mind, the only way we will stop this pandemic is to control the spread of the virus. We do that by not gathering. In his mind, suspending Masses is, therefore, an act of charity. It will

preserve lives. “One person in a crowd can easily infect two or more people, each of whom could infect two or more.” That’s how the disease spreads. He argues that the best weapon we have against this disease is the social distancing we have been asked to follow. I share this story with you because I think it reminds us all that there can be good that comes from our own sacrifices. It is true that we greatly feel the loss of being able to receive communion. In this case, however, it can be seen as an act of love we show to one another. By remaining apart, we slow the spread of this horrible disease. As such our sacrifice becomes an opportunity to show one another in our own lives what the Eucharist makes known to us: God loves us. Our action becomes a manifestation of that love, for all love is of God.

It is that very love of God in Jesus Christ that we see powerfully shown forth in the Gospel this morning. On this 5th Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of the raising from the dead of Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus. This Gospel comes as the third part of a series of wonderful stories in which Jesus shows the love and mercy of God to those he serves. Two weeks ago, we recalled the story of the woman at the well. Jesus showed her the gift of mercy as he helped her to come to believe that he was the Messiah. Jesus’ forgiveness changed her life and gave it a new meaning. Last week, we heard of Jesus healing a blind man whom he encountered in his journey. He opened this man’s eyes and showed him the light. In the course of his encounter with Jesus the man learned, however, that there is more to light than what we see in the world. Jesus himself is the light. With his eyes open the blind man sees not only the world about him but comes to believe in the one who gives meaning to that world, Jesus, the one who has cured him. In today’s Gospel, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. It is a moment of great joy for Martha and Mary, his sisters. But we know that the story only points itself to the even greater miracle we will witness in Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead. His resurrection opens the way to eternal life for Lazarus and all of us. Even with the miracle of Lazarus being called forth from the tomb, we know that he

will die again. But the resurrection Lazarus and all who follow Jesus will receive through his Easter Resurrection will open the way to eternal life. In speaking with Martha Jesus tells her, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live.”

These Gospel stories, with their hope and promise, point us to Easter. That is what Lent is all about. With these readings, we reflect in a special way on our relationship with God which began at baptism. The water of baptism gives us life. At Easter, we will renew our baptismal promises as we remind ourselves of the way in which those waters brought us into a life with God, one which calls us to live in the light of Jesus, following his way, so that we might live in the hope of eternal life. While we remain in Lent, however, we use this time to examine our lives and ask ourselves if we do live as Jesus has called us to live. In our prayer, our fasting, and in our sharing what we have with others, particularly the needy, we look at ways in which we can more fully allow the light of Christ’s love to shine through our lives. Our present situation gives us abundant opportunity to seek ways in which we can be of service to one another. The message of Lent, then, in these difficult times, as it is in any time, is a call to conversion. Pope Francis reminded us of this on Friday as he led the world in prayer in St. Peter’s Square. He told us that this pandemic is our Lent this year. It calls us to make choices about what truly matters in our lives. It is a time to turn to God and to recognize that no matter how advanced our civilization and technology we cannot save ourselves. We need God, and the God we seek is the one we meet in Jesus Christ on the cross. In him is our hope. It is that cross that points us to Easter. Even in this time of trial it reminds us that God is with us.

In thinking of the cross this morning, I think of Martha and Mary. I expect it was hard for them to accept that God was with them when their brother died. Early in the story of Lazarus, the message comes to Jesus from his friends Martha and Mary that their brother is sick and dying. “Please come,” they beg. And yet Jesus waits for two

days before he goes to Bethany to be with the sisters. In the meantime, Lazarus has died, and is buried. The sisters wonder why Jesus did not come when they contacted him. This is a human story. Even now we are living it. We ask ourselves why we are suffering this pandemic. Why cannot God, whom we call on, bring this to an end? Martha says to Jesus when he does appear, “If you were here, my brother would not have died.” How many of us have said similar things to God in our lives and sufferings, and now in this time all the more?

The moment when Lazarus was called to come from the grave was a moment of great joy for his sisters. At the same time, that joy did not erase the experience they had already suffered of his loss. It was part of their lives. But the cross reminds us that Jesus’ life was no different. His rising from the dead on Easter Sunday does not eliminate the indescribable pain and sorrow of Good Friday. The cross and its suffering is very real in the life of Jesus. So, too, is it in ours. These moments are difficult. We would rather not have to go through this time, this disease, this dislocation of our lives. But, in faith, we accept it, and see what our faith calls for us in this moment. It is the cross in our lives.

And that cross is our hope because we do not carry it alone. We were reminded by Pope Francis on Friday that Jesus’ cross “is the anchor that has saved us, the rudder that has redeemed us, and our hope, because “by His cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from His redeeming love.” The cross is not an obstacle to our lives. It is a call in faith to seek the help of God for ourselves and to help each other by serving one another with kindness and patience.

Let us pray today, then, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, asking the Lord to assist us in seeking ways to help each other to bear the cross which is ours this Lent. Reach out to the lonely; Pray for the sick. Care for those who go

without. By such acts of love, faith tells us that we will deepen within ourselves the hope that convinces us that God is with us – even in difficulty.

God bless you all.