

Homily (Fr Joe Rautenberg)
March 26, 2023
Fifth Sunday of Lent
23:02-33:14

As we said in the introduction, I'm Fr Joe Rautenberg. I've been here before. This was my first parish. My knees don't work as well as they did then and so I'm not going to try the steps, but I'm honored to be with you today.

The readings are rich as we come toward the end of Lent. The themes of life and death, power and weakness, tears and threats. Our Gospel passage today ends with many Jews believing. But not all believed. A little farther on in the Gospel passage, it says that that was often the occasion, particularly in John, the miracle was the occasion of a hardening of opposition to Jesus. And the many people plotting to kill him and for good measure, to also kill Lazarus.

Yesterday was the 25th of March and we celebrated the feast of the Annunciation, the feast that begins Jesus' life on Earth. Certainly not the beginning of the Word of God, the second Person of the Trinity. But do your shopping early...nine months from now, is Christmas.

Death and life go together. They go together for us human beings. And Jesus, like us, was born and died. But of course, he was not just like us.

Yesterday evening I had Mass Good Shepherd parish and it was celebrating a Memorial Mass for Fr. John Beitans, the former pastor who was a classmate of mine, who died three years ago. So in a sense, that congregation was brought together by death - to remember.

But maybe it's death that draws us together here. The recognition of our own mortality, whatever our age. The recognition that we will die. But also, being here only makes sense because of hope, because of hope that death, although it does come to all of us, it is not the end for any of us. There is a power greater than death. There's a resource stronger than memory or family to help us face mortality and even to help us conquer it.

We are still in Lent, that we're more than half-way through. Easter is coming. And our God is the Lord of Creation, the Lord of Life, the Lord of Abundant Life. The Book of Wisdom says, in the Old Testament that God did not make death and he does not delight in the death of the living.

In the First Reading today you can almost hear the longing of God speaking through the prophet, “Oh my people – Then you shall know that I am the Lord. When I open your graves and have you rise from them. Oh my people.” God wants us to live and to live abundantly. God wants us to live forever together with those we love. But also together with God. That is a great hope.

Jesus, by the power of God, raised Lazarus from the dead, prefiguring his own Greater Resurrection to a life with no more death. Because Lazarus resuscitated, you might say, would have to die again.

There is a great comfort in our faith. Maybe a comfort that draws us here and hopefully a comfort that we can take with us. To experience God’s power to raise us up after our death: this is our hope – that we will see God face-to-face. It is God’s promise in Jesus. But we’re not there yet.

We may miss those who die. We may grieve over their loss. Perhaps for some of us a loss that is quite recent. We may be fearful of our own coming deaths and God understands that.

Before Jesus raised Lazarus, it says that He wept. He wept at Lazarus’ tomb and that might seem kind of strange. Why? Knowing that he was going to raise Lazarus, why did Jesus weep? Maybe he wept with the grief that Lazarus’ friends and sisters had already experienced. Maybe he wept because he could not yet change all of us and abolish death – to raise all of us at that moment to eternal and abundant life in his Father’s house.

We all have to go through that cross, that dying. It’s reassuring to be able to look forward to eternal life, to being again with those we love. But I think it’s also good to remember that Jesus wept. Because as I said at the start, Jesus is Emmanuel. Not a God who waits in the future to rescue us from death. But Emmanuel, “God with Us,” God with us here and now, to the extent we allow that, to the extent we make room for that. He is here to strengthen our hope. Here to heal the pain of loss.

We don’t have certainty. We have faith and we have hope. But we don’t find those in this world anywhere else. The comfort of our hope in God’s loving power is the power shone in Jesus’ mission and all his healing – especially in his Resurrection. It certainly challenges us. We not only are to accept the comfort of this hope, but we are to share it. The Good News is given us not just for our sake, but for the sake of all those we contact, all those we can contact, all those we can lift up with hope, with mercy, to serve God’s life in our sisters and brothers

We know the forces of death are powerful. They're powerful in our world. They're powerful in our city. It seems like every night and certainly every weekend, people are shot and killed. Maybe those forces are powerful in us, powerful in our own angers and resentments and indifference.

We can't solve everything. We can work on ourselves, work on allowing God to change our hearts. There may be times when we can work with God in the world to solve a problem. But other times when we can only be with those who are suffering and try to witness to hope.

Whether we can help by doing something, or just help by our presence, will we be there? Will we not give in to the forces of darkness or death and withdraw into selfishness, withdraw into selfishness, into our own angers and defensiveness?

We are a pro-life Church. We certainly want to work against the evil of abortion. But life is broader than that. Jesus said he came to bring life in abundance – not just physical life and continuation. We are also pro-life in that we are to work against whatever oppresses and kills the Spirit.

And so as we thank God today for hope, for the Good News, let us try to be open to God's Spirit as it calls us also to be instruments of Good News, to lift up others in hope, to comfort others with mercy and to share with others something of that peace, which we have in Jesus Christ.