

April 6, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

From "The Message" translation of the Book of Romans....today's Epistle begins:

"Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them...living and breathing God!".

All three readings today have a common theme....New Life in God.

I was going to write the Hope of new life in God...but for me the word "hope" has some doubt associated with it.....with Jesus Christ there is much more than hope, there is an absolute certainty. Our Lord makes a fundamental difference in our lives.

He has proved over and over again, not just in scripture , but in life's experiences that anything and everything is possible if we put our lives in the hands of Jesus Christ.

Today is the sixth and last Sunday in Lent . You may already know that the word "Lent" comes from the old English, Anglo Saxon word, "lencten," which means "spring. Lent probably comes from the same root as the word "long" referring to "the lengthening days," as the earth moves from the winter solstice toward the spring equinox.

The word Lent is just one more example that Christianity , our feasts and seasons, do not exist in isolation but are rather enmeshed into the ongoing history of the world at large.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. We are fortunate to have Bishop Chris Epting with us that day.

In his letter to the Romans Paul is convinced that because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection a new reality is available for humankind.

Paul believes that this new reality is not something people dream about in their heads, or have to work hard to pretend that they are living in. It is not a reality that exists somewhere else or in the future. Paul is certain that it is real, it is here, and it is now. Paul is convinced that because of Christ's life, death, and

resurrection the new reality -- some interpreters of Paul, like J. L. Martyn, call it a new cosmos -- is here now.

Paul believes that here and now humans can live *in* the Spirit.. This is not to say that they constantly have experiences of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues or prophesying or the capacity for self-sacrificial love. It is rather to say that Paul thinks that believers in Christ live in a new eco-system, a new place with new reality structures

Paul understands that believing in Jesus Christ means at the same time **living** in Christ Jesus. Our belief in Christ is our entrance into the being of Christ.

At the adult forum the past few weeks we have been exploring evidence of there being life after death. One of the facts that shouted out at me is that we may all have undeveloped senses that are able to perceive alternative, what we call spiritual realities. Paul addressed this in that he suggests we enter an alternate cosmos through our faith in Christ. That alternate reality is the reality of Christ and the Spirit. This is a vastly different place and way to live than when we lived in the Flesh.

The "Flesh" here refers not to the skin of our bodies but to a way of living, a reality, a cosmos that inevitably results in death . The "Flesh" for Paul is a power, a force that works alongside sin and death.

How then does all this relate to our everyday lives?

Many of us experience times in our lives when the Flesh, the normal everyday way of living just proves incapable of dealing with a situation we are facing.

The situation may be life threatening illness or injury; it may be profound grief at the death of a loved one such as Lazarus in today's Gospel. It may be the prospect of sudden financial ruin or it may be the accumulation of endless days of scraping by. Living from hand to mouth....and of course starvation in so many parts of the world.

It may be false imprisonment or punishment as a result of an unintended or misconstrued action. It may be any situation where we feel we have been not been treated justly...resulting in sometimes catastrophic circumstances. Human misery goes on and on

Almost always the Flesh alone proves incapable of resolving our problems.

In my life , my worst situation is described in chapter ten of "The Black Dog". If you will indulge me, particularly those who have read the book,

"I remember the month as being November, because my Mother always said that if something bad was going to happen to us as a family, it was usually in November. The year was the late 1990s when I experienced the worst attack of depression in my life.

I remember waking very early in the morning and making my way downstairs to the kitchen. I remember thinking it was too early to either wake my wife Karen or the kids or call Bob my counselor.

I felt immersed by negative thoughts; it was as if I was standing in a large water tank and water was pouring in on me. As the water became deeper and deeper I knew I was going to drown in the waters of my own uncontrollable negative emotion.

I began to panic and at that very moment when I feared that this might be the end of my life..... I realized there was someone else in the tank alongside of me. This other person or being held my hand and said quite clearly... I will never forget the words..... "John if this is the worst that the depression can do to us, then we will both be just fine"

I discerned the presence of the Holy Spirit in that experience, at that moment. The water receded, the fear went away and ever since that moment in time depression has lost much of its power over me."

Jesus Christ saved my earthly life that day..... the Flesh alone could not cope and I would undoubtedly have died without God sending his Angel into that tank with me. The Holy Spirit lifted me up, the Dog was vanquished and my life changed from that moment.

Jesus Christ giving our life back, however, does not necessarily make it all peaches and cream from that time forward. Certainly not.

If I may quote from Courtney Reid's piece from Living Compass for today.

:"While most of us do not have the experience of coming back to life after dying, as Lazarus in today's Gospel, nonetheless many of us have experienced coming back to life from the depths of depression or grief, from the agony of pain or from the challenges of addiction. While others may be thrilled that we "are our old selves" the return to life can in fact be hard and uncomfortable. We may feel uncertain, perhaps afraid of what our life will be like now. We may even yearn for a return to the familiar, perhaps with some slight adjustments (my words) .

Courtney ends her piece with a challenge to us are we ready to leave the Flesh and put our lives fully in the hands of Jesus Christ?

I would like to end on a slightly different note. The story of Lazarus always reminds me of the Comedy, "The Life of Brian" with the Monty Python crew. Brian meets a man termed in the script as the ex-leper.

The ex-leper is fed up....he had lived since a child as a deformed leper begging on the street. The ex-leper tells Brian that a couple of weeks before he had met this guy called Jesus.....and Jesus had healed him. The ex-leper was overjoyed..but then he discovered that the healing had taken away his livelihood. He no longer could beg..and he had no other skills.

Brian says..why don't you go and find this Jesus and ask him to reverse the healing and make you a leper again. Good Lord no said the ex-leper, being a leper was much too painful and difficult.

Alright... Brian says, ask this Jesus to just give you a convincing limp, at least something that will allow you to continue your begging career.

We all have experiences such as with the leper that prove the Flesh alone is inadequate to deal with life's issues.

In contrast, our Blessed Lord gives us proof over and over again, not just in scripture , but in our life experiences, that anything and everything is possible if we are really committed to putting our lives in the hands of Jesus Christ.

Amen