

HOMILY for 5th SUNDAY of LENT – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel talks about Lazarus' death & how Jesus raised him from the dead. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

This guy's father dies, & he tells the undertaker he wants his dad the very best. So, they have the funeral, & the undertaker sends him a bill for \$16,000. He pays it. A month later, he gets a bill for \$85, which he pays. The next month there's another \$85 bill, & the next month there's another. Finally the guy calls up the undertaker. The undertaker says, "Well, you said you wanted the best for your dad, so I have rented him a tux."

Anyway, two Sundays ago, Jesus promised to give the Samaritan woman at the well & all His followers the living water that would nourish their souls & quench their spiritual thirst. Last Sunday, Jesus healed the blind beggar & promised to give the man & all His followers clear vision & good spiritual sight to have a full picture of life & make right decisions. This Sunday Jesus tops those two blessings & wants to give us the best gift of all – the gift of divine spirit to bring us life as we recall how Jesus brought his friend Lazarus back to life. Before trying to learn more about that special gift, let us first explore the world of spirit throughout our human history.

Here is how the First Book of the Bible – Genesis 2:7 tells us about the divine spirit: "...At the time when the Lord God made the earth & the Heavens... the Lord God formed human out of the clay of the ground & blew into his nostrils the breath of life; & so human became a living being." As you can see, the Lord God formed us humans out of the dust of the earth & then breathed the divine spirit into the human body to give it life. Without the divine spirit, even the best human body would have no life & die. So, it is not the human body that sustains & defines a person like the modern world might try to convince us. Rather, it is the divine spirit that gives life to a person & molds that person into a son/daughter of God. So, why do some people turn into slaves of darkness? Who is responsible for that bad transformation?

Before answering those questions, let us see how the divine spirit gives life to a human person & the whole Creation & helps transform the whole world into wonderful, lively creatures of God. Here is how this Sunday's First Reading lets us see the amazing work of the divine spirit: "Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I will open your graves & have you rise from them, & bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord... O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live." So, prophet Ezekiel compared the returning of the Israelites to their homeland to the opening of the graves of the dead. For the Lord God would breathe the divine spirit into the weak & exhaustive bodies of the exiled Israelites & bring them home safely. The Lord God would also try to soften the hearts of their invaders to let the Israelites return to their homeland & rebuild their shattered lives. The work of the Lord God in bringing the people of God back to life is like getting the dead out of the graves by breathing the divine spirit into their tired & hopeless bodies. That spirit would also give the exiled Israelites hope & courage to keep on living. Otherwise, they would feel depressed & give up on living like we have seen what happens to our world with its current suicide pandemic.

Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, & Aristotle were some of the first people who discussed at great length on the human spirit & its important role in keeping human bodies alive. Without that form, even the best human bodies would not be able to survive a minute in

this world. Then, theologians such as St. Augustine & St. Thomas Aquinas came along & wrote more about spirit as they added the new concept of soul. Like spirit, our souls would never die. Our human souls & spirit help keep our bodies alive. When our souls & spirit leave us to return to their Creator, our bodies die. As someone who was trained as a hospital chaplain to deal with birth & death & who has assisted the dying with the Last Rite, I have witnessed when the soul/spirit enters into this world through birth of a baby & when it leaves the body at the moment of death. Let me share with you one of my unique spiritual experiences I had as I witnessed the soul/spirit leave the body of an organ donor at the hospital. A lady had an aneurism & could not survive it. She and her family had agreed to donate her organs to people in need. So, I gave her the Last Rite & waited at the hospital with her family for the doctors to harvest her organs. Although I have experienced the moment the soul/spirit leave the body before in my thirty years of priestly ministry, this time I had witnessed her soul/spirit continue to hang on inside of her body for twenty more minutes after her heart & lung were long removed. Indeed, I could relate to Martha & Mary as they thought they had said goodbye to their brother Lazarus already. However, Jesus surprised them & breathed the divine spirit into Lazarus' body as He told him, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out as he was bound hand & foot with linen strips while his face was wrapped in a cloth. That is a great example of the power & blessing of the divine spirit. It brought life back to the body of Lazarus.

Unfortunately, we have seen many current experiences contrary to the one in today's Gospel as people have shown hate & violence every day around the world. Instead of witnessing the miracle of birth & resurrection, we have seen so much death & destruction lately. Sometimes we wonder why we have seen so much darkness & evil around the world & who is responsible for that bad transformation. I believe it is because we have let the Devil fill our souls/spirit & our world with darkness & evil spirit. We have allowed the Devil to dupe us & transform our souls/spirit into a dark & evil place & our world into a killing field & a grave yard. That is why one of the top priorities for Jesus during His ministry was to drive out evil spirits & expel demons. If we want to continue His mission & experience more miracles of life & joy like the one in today's Gospel, we must drive out evil spirit in all its forms from our souls/spirit & our world. At the same time, we have to fill up our souls/spirit & our world with divine spirit. Unlike evil spirit, divine spirit will always bring us love, peace, & life.

My dear brothers & sisters, Jesus walked the journey of the Cross & reached out to the mourning family of Martha, Mary, & Lazarus during His ministry to bring our world life & all the blessings of divine spirit. We should continue His ministry & try to welcome divine spirit into our world every chance possible to witness more miracles of life & joy like the one in today's Gospel. Or, we could let the evil spirit take over our world & experience constant death & destruction as we have seen right now.