

5 Lent Yr. A: Spirit Mind

Ezekiel 37:1-14 Romans 8:6-11 John 11:17-44

The Rev. Paul D. Allick, The Church of the Advent, March 29, 2020

The 11th Chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews opens with this, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

In the Gospel today, Martha and Mary are vacillating between things seen and unseen, between hope and despair. Their brother Lazarus has been dead for four days. Their only hope is Jesus but he has been delayed.

While they despair, they still hope. Each sister greets Jesus with, “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

Had Jesus arrived earlier before Lazarus died, we would have another healing story. Instead Jesus is about to do the impossible. He says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.”

As Jesus orders Lazarus, who already has the stench of corpse, to come out of that tomb and to be unbound, God’s will is made clear. Death no longer has dominion. In Christ we will not die forever. Certainly, we will experience it momentarily just as Jesus did but we will also rise with him to eternity.

Martha and Mary believe this and that is why they call for Jesus. But believing and having faith that it will happen are very different. We can believe everything we say in the Creed but when the reality of life and death come to us, do we have the faith to stick with God no matter what?

As St. Paul reminds writes in Romans, “To set the mind on the flesh is death (that is to limit our view to the natural physical world, to our emotions and prejudices), but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (that is to keep our focus on God, to things hoped for but not yet seen).

To look toward God is to use our imagination and lift ourselves out of simply doing religion toward real things like hope, reconciliation, and self-sacrifice. Then like Lazarus we will be truly unbound.

Years ago, while visiting my sister, I went with her to mass at her Roman Catholic Church. I warned her before hand that I would not be receiving communion. I wanted to respect the boundaries of their tradition and I did not want to put her priest in an awkward position. They live in a very small town. People would notice the Episcopal Priest receiving communion at the Catholic Church.

As everyone went forward, I stayed in my pew and prayed to spiritually receive Jesus. The hymn “Taste and See” was being sung. As I prayed, I imagined being at the heavenly altar with all the faithful departed. I could truly sense departed friends and relatives with me. I could see them. I felt the presence of countless throngs of angels and saints surrounding us.

Then it hit me. Everyone in heaven is receiving spiritual communion. In this life we receive it physically but a day will come when we enter that throng and spiritually receive the real presence of Jesus Christ, body, soul and divinity...for ever and ever. The physical reception is a wonderful foretaste but I began to imagine the glory of the reception to come.

With a lump in my throat, I shared this story with my sister on the car ride home. I said, “See, had I followed my own willfulness and taken communion as something that Jesus would say I could have no matter what the mean old Church said, I would have never experienced any of that.”

She replied, “Well I’m glad I didn’t’ do what I was thinking of doing. I was going to break my wafer in half and sneak it back to you.”

Had I followed my own will I would have never known that sign of love from my sister either.

Things hoped for but not yet seen. When we set our mind on the Spirit life is abundant and constantly multiplying. It is hard to live there because it stands in the face of all we can control and manipulate.

Franciscan writer Fr. Richard Rohr offers this, “The theological virtue of hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution, and still be content and even happy because our Satisfaction is now at another level, and our Source is beyond ourselves.”