April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)
Ezek 37:12-14; Ps 130:1-8; Rom 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

All three readings for today address the theme of ‘new life.’ In the reading from Ezekiel, a new nation is raised out of the grave of destruction and is given a new spirit; in Romans, Paul talks about a new kind of life in the Spirit that is offered through Christ; and the gospel passage recounts the raising back to life of Lazarus. One might presume that the gospel passage holds the major feature of this theme. However, as important as being raised from the dead is, the new life of Lazarus is simply a return to his old life. On the other hand, the new life described in Ezekiel and in Romans is a transformed life, a life engendered by a new spirit.

At the time of Ezekiel the people of Israel had been defeated, their temple destroyed, and their political and spiritual leaders killed, exiled, and dispirited. The reading for today has political significance. It speaks to a nation that has died, to people who have been displaced and who have no hope for a future. It is to such a dismal situation that God makes an extraordinary promise: You will live again, and this life will be effected by the spirit of God. Whether or not the historical people of Israel lived a new and transformed life after the exile is a matter of history, not of theological promise. The point of the passage is that God promises the possibility that a new and transformed life, a life in the spirit, is possible. This new kind of life is the issue to which Paul speaks.

Paul contrasts two ways of living: life in the flesh and life in the spirit. When he refers to the flesh, he is not thinking of specific bodily or sexual behavior. Rather, he is speaking of human nature in all of its limitations, limitations that sometimes incline one away from God and the things of God. On the other hand, life in the spirit is attuned to God. It is, in fact, that dimension of the human being that can be joined to the very Spirit of God.

Just what does this new life in the Spirit mean? No one simply decides: ‘I am going to be a spiritual person,’ and it comes to pass. No nation merely rises from destruction and decay into a new way of existing. If any kind of transformation is to take root, those being transformed must respond to the promptings of the Spirit and take on the challenge of transformation. This challenge is placed before us by the reality of the world within which we live and of which we are a part. In many ways, it is the world that sets the agenda for our transformation, as individuals and as a nation. For example: What do we face in life today that calls us to a new way of living? With whom do we need to be reconciled? Who do we have to forgive? How has resentment burdened us? Where has greed eroded our spirit? When has arrogance left us biased against those who are different in race or ethnic origin, gender or gender preference, economic status or cultural character? What can we do to bring peace to our world? How can we safeguard the integrity of creation? Perhaps we have to face a startling reality: Do we even want to live a new and transformed life? Or are we satisfied with what we have and what we are doing?

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