

Homily 5th Sunday in Lent (2.4.17)

'Unbind him, let him go free' - Cast off your chain

This gospel for this Sunday, the Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year A) is such a powerful one, and with so many layers to it, that you can't possibly cover them all in the time we have today. But one important layer is the question of why do the people we love have to die? Martha speaks for all of us when she says to Jesus, with great faith,

"If you'd been here, my brother would not have died."

We are faced with the mortality of our loved ones, and we wonder where the sense sometimes is, when we can't see beyond the veil of death. And, of course, the message is that those who hear Jesus' voice, have life in them beyond the grave. Lazarus hears the voice of Jesus beyond the grave, and there's life in him through the Spirit of God. Well that's one straight and true message, but for me you have to look and say, 'Well, what hits me, where's the message for me?'

And the thing that struck me, pondering on this gospel, was Jesus' words,

"Unbind him, let him go free."

It's a very powerful phrase, because of course Lazarus was wrapped in the grave clothes. But there's something not just about resuscitation, but about freeing a person to live. At one level Lazarus is a powerful symbol, or a representative figure of all those who need to be unbound so that they can live. We think of Ezekiel in that first reading, prophesying about the exiles coming back home, and we think of all the exiles and migrants that are displaced in our world today. Ezekiel says,

"I will resettle you in your own land, and re-establish you."

Many of them need unbinding to be set free in their own countries - and we need to work for that in effective ways.

I was reading an article today in the Spectator, that pointed out that there may be collusion between people traffickers and some aid agencies. The nearest port for many trafficked people is in Tunisia, but apparently some aid agencies

are notified when the flimsy boats are near to Italy. Many of the boats are carrying fit and healthy young men from Africa, and the article states that perhaps if the aid agencies weren't on hand, the tide of economic migrants would dry up. However the problem is very complicated, and of course we need to continue to give help to everyone in genuine need.

One of the things that strikes me about 'Unbind him, let him go free,' is that we need to put pressure on all our governments to ensure that everyone, everywhere, is made free from the binding cloths of war, famine and disease. But at another more individual level, how many people in our own society are 'bound' by so many selfish prejudices, so many closed doors? Many people are 'bound' economically or through addictions, or through a closed mindset to any concept of Something, Someone greater than themselves – closed to any concept of a spiritual life, and the liberating beauty of the Christian Faith. As Saint Paul points out in the second reading, there are so many unspiritual things in the world, where people are 'bound' by the pursuit of material things – things which in the end have no lasting value at all. People can't see beyond all this to a deeper meaning and purpose for our existence.

In the famous film 'Boys Town' a young delinquent is rescued by a priest, and set to work helping to found a refuge for other 'rejects' like himself. The boy says that the experience liberated him, and for the first time in his young life, he felt valued, and wanted, and needed. So you never know, a simple phrase, a simple good action can 'unbind' someone from their prejudiced and myopic vision.

And then finally, this phrase, 'Unbind him, let Him go free.' In Lent especially this phrase applies to us – where am I bound – what is preventing me from living a deeper, more Christian life. Where do I put my affections and attentions. Wrong attachments can bind us, and stunt our spiritual growth. This is where Confession can help, and I'll be putting details of extra Confessions for Easter, in next week's bulletin.

If you've a bible at home, the gospel of Lazarus is well worth reading again over the next week. Look for a phrase that applies to you – where are YOU bound?