

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Homily: Fr. Shijo George

Pastor – Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Victoria, BC, Canada

“Remove the Stone!” — A Call to New Life

Today’s Readings, from Book of Ezekiel (37:12–14), Letter to the Romans (8:8–11), and the Gospel of St. John (11:1–45) all proclaim one powerful message: God is a God who brings life out of death.

In the First Reading, through the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks to a broken people in exile; people who had lost everything - their land, their temple, and their identity. Following the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, and the destruction of the First Temple, the Judean exiles in Babylon faced total hopelessness believing their nation was permanently dead. They lost their land, their monarchy, and their central place of worship, leading to the lament: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost ...” (Ezekiel 37:11). To them, God makes a promise: “I will open your graves and bring you up from them.” This is not just about physical graves; it is about spiritual graves - moments in life when we feel dead inside: when hope is gone, when faith becomes weak, and when shame and sin weigh us down.

In the Gospel, Jesus Christ stands before another grave - the tomb of Lazarus; and what does Jesus say? “Remove the stone!”

This stone is not just a physical object; it is a spiritual reality. The stone represents everything that blocks God’s grace in our lives: our doubts, our fears, our sins, our shame, and our loss of hope. Sometimes we cover our lives with this stone. When we make mistakes, instead of turning back to God, we hide them. We repeat them, and slowly we lose our spiritual sensitivity. We become numb: no feelings of regret, no repentance, and no awareness. That is a spiritual grave! And like Martha, we often say: “Lord, don’t go there... it is too late... it will smell, and it’s stinky!”



Martha's attitude and responses are very human. She believes and has faith; but only up to a point. She trusts; but only within what she can understand. Isn't that our struggle too? We say: "This habit cannot change." "This sin is too deep." "This situation is beyond repair." "Even God cannot fix this." That is the stone of unbelief. But Jesus challenges Martha, and us: "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

My dear friends, even the "stench" Martha speaks about has a spiritual meaning. It is the stench of sin; the stench of guilt; the stench of shame; and the stench of lost dignity. Yet, Jesus is not afraid of the stench. He is not afraid of our brokenness. He only asks one thing: "Remove the stone!" - Not because He cannot do it, but because He wants our cooperation. We take one step, and God brings resurrection! This is exactly what happened in the life of Zacchaeus. When he welcomed Jesus into his house, he removed the stone of greed, isolation, and guilt. And what followed? He received a new life; a kind of spiritual resurrection. As St. Paul the Apostle reminds us in Romans: "The Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you." That same Spirit is within us today.

So the question is not whether God can give life. The question is: Are we ready to remove the stone? The stone of unbelief, despair, resentment, lack of trust, and repeated sins. If we are ready, God is ready. He says to us today, just as He said in Ezekiel: "I will open your graves... I will put my Spirit within you... and you shall live." My dear brothers and sisters, this is a call to spiritual awakening: a call to come out of our graves; a call to trust beyond what we see.

So today, let us ask ourselves: What is the stone that is covering my life? What is the grave I am hiding in? And with faith, let us hear the voice of Christ calling us to "Remove the stone... and come out."