

5th Sunday of Lent: Yr. A – 2020
[Ez 37:12-14 • Rom 8:8-11 • Jn 11:1-45]

As a new priest, I was a visiting a patient in the hospital and he had the covers over his head. So I went to the nurses' station and inquired about the gentleman's status. The nurse said, "*Gee, I hope he is sleeping and not the other thing.*" None of us are strangers to death; certainly not during this pandemic that unravels around us. Being more aware nowadays of our own mortality is not a bad thing, but rather can lead us closer to God. To draw closer to God, we need the following virtues:

First, **hope draws us closer to God.** The Israelites, in our first reading, were stuck in exile and lost hope of ever returning to their Promised Land. When we lose hope, we stop asking and seeking to see God at work. God granted a vision to the prophet Ezekiel of a great battlefield filled with scattered bones and asked if these dry bones could come back to life. Then God said that He would put his spirit into them and bring them to life. God's final words to Ezekiel were: "*I have promised, and I will do it.*" Our hope is based in a God that keeps His promises.

Second, **patience draws us closer to God.** In our Gospel, Jesus was good friends with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was terminally ill in Bethany. Strangely, Jesus waited two days before departing, and arrived four days after Lazarus died. Why the delay? It is the same question we ask during this pandemic. Why the delay, Lord? His delay meant Lazarus died, Mary sat home and cried, while Martha made this heartfelt and emotional statement: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Patience doesn't mean that our God is slow to care or unaware of our plight, but rather recall what Jesus told His disciples: "*This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God.*" In other words, our hour of need is a place of encounter with our God; a time for Him to be made manifest in our life. Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen, referring to patience said, "*There are not two answers to prayer, but rather three: 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Wait.'*"

Third, **faith draws us closer to God.** Martha followed her first words with a prayer of trust, "*I know that even now whatever you ask of God, God will give you.*" Martha surrendered her terrible situation to utter faith; faith that allowed her to believe in her heart that God's love was more powerful than death. Martha left Jesus to handle the situation as He saw best, because friends don't have to wonder if their friend will act on their behalf . . . they just believe. Jesus told Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live.*" Then he asked a question that we must all answer, "*Do you believe this?*"

Lastly, **desire draws us closer to God.** While waiting for Jesus, Martha and Mary had a desire in their hearts for Jesus to be near. In similar fashion, during these days of sheltering in place, we are not able to meet Jesus at Mass and receive Him in the Eucharist. That sacramental absence should lead to an overwhelming desire for Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist. This desire is maintained when we make an Act of Spiritual Communion; that is, invite Jesus into one's heart and soul when receiving the actual sacrament isn't possible. St. Teresa of Avila wrote: "*When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion... by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you.*" We can make up an act of spiritual communion by expressing our current situation and our desire to receive Jesus again when possible. Or we can recite this one: "*My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You.*" St. John Paul II said, "*It is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist.*"

In the face of so many unknowns in our world, we feel fragile and mortal. This can drive us to fear and other unhealthy behaviors, or it can be a valuable time to draw closer to God. For St. Augustine said, "*God is not a deceiver, that He should offer to support us, then, when we lean upon Him, should [simply] slip away.*"