

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday **The Fifth Sunday of Lent**
April 2 **What God Would Have Us Hope For**
A reflection inspired by a meditation of Sr. Dianne Bergant

Mon **Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent**
3 **Learning to Hope from God**
A reflection from a Commentary by Bishop Jules Saliege

Tues **Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent**
4 **Prayer is a New Life & a New Hope**
A reflection based on a homily by St. John Chrysostom

Wed **Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent**
5 **God's Plan is Our Hope**
A reflection from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus of Lyon

Thurs **Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent**
6 **Our Inward Death & Resurrection**
A reflection inspired by a meditation of Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller

MONASTIC DESERT DAY

Fri **Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent**
7 **Loving with Complete Freedom**
A reflection taken from a Letter by St. Augustine of Hippo

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8 **The Power of Love Gives Us Hope**
A reflection developed from St. Clement's Letter to the Corinthians

WHAT GOD WOULD HAVE US HOPE FOR

A reflection inspired by a meditation by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The first reading at the Eucharist on the Fifth Sunday of Lent displays the prophet Ezekiel's struggle to restore hope to a group of exiles. They express their despair by thinking of themselves as dry bones, bones without any living marrow and so irretrievably dead. So the prophet pictures God making living persons out of a heap of dry bones. Where God is there is always hope—but you have to let God shape your hopes! Being reconciled with God means letting God show you what you can realistically hope for, because God creates reality.

The second reading for this same Eucharistic celebration displays St. Paul's efforts to guide contemporary Roman Christians to place their hope in what God has in store for them. Officially, the Roman state claimed it would last forever, and so the only hope people could realistically have would be as citizens of the Roman Empire. That's just not true, Paul implies. There is only one who lives, and lasts, forever—our God. In Christ God shows us our only real hope.

We are constantly confronted with the fact of illness and death, as were Mary and Martha, Jesus' disciples, and Jesus himself. Jesus' self-description is: "I am the resurrection and the life!" This is the central affirmation in this Sunday's Gospel. When someone you love very much dies, do Jesus' words come spontaneously into your mind? What do you think he means by saying he is "resurrection"? Actually, nobody knows. We have to trust and believe God so loves each of us nothing essential will ever be lost!

Notice what Jesus says to his disciples: "I am glad for you that I wasn't there with Lazarus to prevent his death, and I am glad because you will now learn to believe." We have to believe that what God has in store for us will be good beyond our ability to imagine. Martha and Mary never cease to trust in Jesus, and yet don't expect Jesus to do what he does. They hope in God but don't know what they to hope for concretely. That is our situation too. Are we blind because of our sin or sinfulness?

We have been selfish and arrogant and deceitful. We allow violence to devastate the lives of others and do things that damage others inwardly. Does doing such things indicate we don't know what to hope for or seek? Why did Jesus allow Martha and Mary to suffer so much? Somehow we can't make sense of God's values and let our false values shape our hopes. Are you ready to let God reshape what you hope for even if you have to trust God blindly?

LEARNING TO HOPE FROM GOD

A commentary on the raising of Lazarus by Bishop J. Saliege

When Lazarus fell ill, his two sisters sent a message to Jesus informing him of the fact. They thought it was enough to tell Jesus to have him act to help their brother. But he did nothing. Two days after he receives the message, Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus is dead. Only then does he say, *“Let’s go to him.”*

Faith is always faith. The Master demands it, looks for it, arranges sets of circumstances that will help it grow and thrive in us. We have to have confidence, brothers and sisters, even when our prayers don’t seem to be heard. It is not that they haven’t come to the heart of Jesus; that is not the reason they go unanswered. If something negative happens because they are not “heard” it is not because he had not seen our tears. He follows the growth of evil in such a way that nothing can obscure it or distract him from seeing it clearly. If he does not “come” at the hour you expect then his hour, then yours hasn’t yet come.

When Martha and Mary were alerted to the approach of the Messiah, it was the always lively Martha who went to meet him, despite her sorrow. She reproaches him, *“Lord, if you had been here my brother would never have died.”* It is an indirect confession of confidence in Jesus. Yes, if he had been present his goodness wouldn’t have let her brother die, but she adds: *“Even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask of Him”*. So how can she be surprised when Lazarus is raised?

She doesn’t doubt. There is no shadow of hesitation in her about Jesus’ power to save. Her faith remains entire, absolute, without reservation. But she has not reached the deepest sources of God’s almighty power and what it can do in and through Jesus. God acts in service of goodness. She must grow in what she dares to hope for. Without ceasing to be humble she must imagine what is impossible. That is where Jesus is taking her when he says: *“Your brother will rise again”*. *“I know”*, she says, *“he will rise on the last day”*. Why this restriction on her hope?

Can’t she imagine what Jesus means in calling himself “the resurrection and the life”? Did she believe, even without understanding? She affirms what she can understand. *“I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God”*. We might have said these words. Would we be amazed if Jesus called one of our beloved dead out of the grave? You don’t believe he will do that, do you? But he said: *“Lazarus, come out!”* Do you believe the world will actually be transformed if you love others as Jesus has loved you?

PRAYER IS NEW LIFE & A NEW HOPE

A reflection taken from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

Prayer and communion with God are the realization of the highest good, and so of the richest of all hopes. They bring us into fellowship and union with God. Just as earthly light enables earthly eyes to see, so gazing on God floods our hearts with a light that reveals hope where we had seen none. Now in speaking of prayer in this way I am not speaking of anything mechanical or done only by formula. It is a movement of the heart.

This movement isn't confined to fixed times and seasons and it continues night and day. It is not only at fixed hours of prayer that one should turn one's mind to God. Yes, we need to do it at such times but also when we are busy with our occupations. We should do it especially when we are helping the poor or engaged in any work of mercy. The remembrance of God's goodness and the longing for God should permeate all we do. All becomes an offering to the Lord and all deeds are seasoned with the love of God. Every moment is prayer.

Prayer is the light of the soul and it reveals to us true knowledge of God. It is the medium of communication between God and human persons. Through prayer our hearts are raised to heaven and we embrace God in a way beyond the power of words to convey. Like an infant crying for its mothers so we must crave divine nourishment. It makes us joyful and gives us peace. But don't imagine it is an effect of words. It is longing.

Prayer is a wordless love that embodies friendship and mutual belonging created by divine grace. Listen to St. Paul: "*We don't know how we ought to pray but by inarticulate groans the Spirit itself intercedes for us.*" For anyone to whom the Lord has granted such prayer it is a treasure that can't be lost and a heavenly food that satisfies. Once you taste it an eternal longing for God burns fiercely in your heart.

We are preparing to receive our Risen Lord. We do it with lowly hearts. In effect, we repaint the walls of our home with the light of righteousness. We cover parts of them with a gold leaf of good works and hang up icons of true faith. But what completes this house of God is prayer. It transforms our capacity to hope in God—as my words themselves make clear. This is the temple into which we must welcome the Risen Christ. And we will have this temple to show others what wonders God realizes for those who love and pray and serve one another. We become a proclamation of new hope for new life to all who see how God has transformed us by giving us a hope, not of this world but in it. This is the Kingdom of goodness realized by the lives of God's children.

GOD'S PLAN IS OUR HOPE

A reflection developed from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus of Lyon

In the beginning God created Adam because God wished to have some-one upon whom benefits could be lavished. As far as God was concerned there was no need to create anything since the Word gave perfect glory to the Father.

We know this from the Lord's own words: "*Father, glorify me with the glory that I had with you before the world was made.*" Nor did God create us needing our service. God commands us to follow him simply in order to save us for communion in all divine good. To follow Our Savior is to share in divine light and all that is.

Those who live in the light do not cause it to shine; they are illuminated and made radiant. They contribute nothing to the light but receive all that is good by being illuminated by it. This is the way service of God works. God gains no benefit from it and has no need of our obedience.

Yet upon those who follow and serve God is showered life, incorruptibility and eternal glory. He rewards service and obedience but derives no benefit from them. God is perfectly rich and in need of nothing. It is God's plan to share all this with us. God is good and merciful.

This is why God seeks our service. If we persevere in this service God, as a reward, admits us into a life that is communion. Human neediness is equaled only by God's freedom from all need. To live is, for God, to share freely. Thus our glory is to persevere in God's service and so share all God is.

Our Lord's words to his disciples explain this to us: "*You did not choose me. It is I who chose you!*" This is Our Savior's teaching. We do God no honor by following Christ but because we follow Christ we are honored by the Son of God and live in communion with Him.

Our Lord declares: "*It is my will that where I am you also may be with me.*" He doesn't say this because he gains anything thereby. He says it so that we may live in hope knowing that our salvation and fullness of life are part of the plan embodied in creation. How could we not hope, no matter what we suffer or what joys we find on earth?

OUR INWARD DEATH & RESURRECTION

**A reflection taken from a meditation by Fr. Carroll
Stuhlmueeller**

Scholars remind us that those whom Jesus raised from the dead were not “resurrected”; they died again the “resurrection life” excludes death. The reason Scripture compares the raising, say, of Lazarus with Jesus’ resurrection to explain this. It first directs our attention to our new hope in the Risen Jesus and highlights what relationship with Jesus requires of us. This is seen first in the way Jesus responds to Martha’s complaint about his coming too late to keep Lazarus from dying. *“I am the resurrection and the life; all who believe in me, even though they die, will come to life, and all who are alive and believe in me will never die.”* As applied to you and me, it is false that we will never die. Jesus doesn’t intend that we think of living and dying in the ordinary sense of those words. ‘Resurrection’ means a religious experience that comes from the transforming presence of Jesus within us, and changes us in a way that can never be undone. Further, it isn’t just an individual event that comes to be at a particular moment. The transformation makes us inseparable members of a community in a way that isn’t complete until Jesus dwells within us all completely. This is one reason why it has been associated with the “last day” and the “last judgment”.

We can’t rightly understand resurrection except in terms of Jesus’ rising. It is a matter of Jesus alive within us right now and ready to change our live from now on. That’s why Paul says that apart from Jesus’ resurrection Christian preaching means nothing. It has to focus on *“the Spirit of God who ... dwells in you”*. The Spirit’s presence brings joy, love, mildness, chastity and much more. But it also brings a need to be crucified “with” Jesus. This brings us to the special meaning of “death” in Jesus’ words. What he did to Mary and Martha, and Lazarus, was show them how his indwelling closes the door on all ordinary earthly hopes—in the possibilities of having power, wealth, prestige, and so on. These are consigned to a tomb with a stone sealing it off. Are we buried with these hopes? Are we identified with power, wealth, etc. or will we let the presence of Jesus lead us out of that tomb into a life based on wholly other hopes? Jesus says: Take away the stone! That stone is the disappointment of our failures and frustrations to find life anywhere but in Jesus. Living in us, Jesus “is” the resurrection. We see how we have to die to come to life in Jesus. But we must be faithful to the very different hope he gives us, and be faithful in deed and so in the way we live with and for others now and forever.

LOVING WITH COMPLETE FREEDOM

A reflection from a Letter by St. Augustine of Hippo

When the time came for the grace that is the new covenant to be revealed through Jesus Christ there was not even a suggestion that people are to be drawn to God by promises of earthly happiness or goods. To make this clear Our Lord accepted sufferings, being scourged and spit upon, being mocked and nailed to a cross, and dying like one humiliated and conquered. Only love for God remained.

He endured all this so that people who believe in him might learn what recompense for dutiful service they might expect from the God who has declared them his own children. They had to learn to serve, and so to love, without an eye to earthly prosperity. To value the trust in God that they had been given only in terms of earthly goods would be to devalue it in a way that would make it equivalent to the sort of things one tramples under foot.

By his great human compassion, and by coming among us in the form of a slave, Christ—who is both divine and human—teaches us what we too should devalue in our earthly life, and what sort of life we should hope for.

At the very climax of his passion, when his enemies thought they had won a mighty victory, he gave voice to all that is weak in a human person: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He was being crucified along with our former selves so as to set us free to put on a new self.

In doing this our Head was praying one of the psalms. He is praying as one who feels abandoned, one whose prayers have seemed to be of no help. Jesus made these words and feelings his own. They were not only his own personal words but our words—i.e., the words of his Body. This body is the Church and we are the living stones of which it is made.

The Church, living in us, must endure the sufferings of conversion from unregenerate humanity into a “new creation”. Human weakness calls out in those words from the cross. It suffers as it is weaned from the good things of this earth and taught a new hope, for the good things that are only had in God and by sharing God’s life. Isn’t that the meaning of all we force ourselves to suffer as we observe Lent? We are learning to love as a completely free sharing. That is how God loves, and lives.

THE POWER OF LOVE GIVES US HOPE

A reflection developed from St. Clement's Letter to the Corinthians

Anyone truly possessed by the love of Christ is sure to keep God's commandments. The love of God creates a bond stronger than any other. Who can express this in fitting words or describe the beauty of divine love? What is more, the heights to which this love raises us are indescribable.

Love unites us to God. Love cancels innumerable sins. Love has no limits to its endurance or faithfulness. Love bears everything patiently. Love is neither servile nor arrogant. Love doesn't provoke divisions or factions. It always leads those who live by it to harmony and cooperation. By it all God's chosen ones are sanctified and without it no one can please God.

It was out of love that the Lord took us to himself. Because God loves us, because it is the will of our Heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus Christ gave his life's blood for us and his flesh to save our flesh, his life to save our lives. See, beloved, what a great and wonderful thing love is, and especially God's love for us! How inexpressible is this love's perfection! What, then, have we to fear if we live in the love we have been given?

No one is worthy to possess such love. Yet God makes us worthy! So we must turn to God and beg God, by the divine mercy that a love free from all partiality and beyond reproach may be found in us. Every generation has passed away from Adam's time until our own. Those who, by God's grace, were made perfect in love have a dwelling even now among the holy ones. When the Kingdom of Christ appears, all these will be revealed as one in God. Take courage, God says to us, and a day of gladness will come when I will raise you from your graves to glory. Beloved, it is by keeping God's commandments and living together in harmony and mutual helpfulness that we shall find happiness.

The love that we show one another will win us forgiveness of our sins. As Scripture says: "*Happy are those whose transgressions are pardoned, whose sins are forgiven. Happy those to whom the Lord imputes no fault, on whose lips there is no guile.*" This is the blessing given those whom God has chosen through Jesus Christ our Lord. All we can hope for is given us through the love we show to God as a response to the love God shows us. It transforms us day by day.