

5th Sunday in Lent - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Ezekiel 37:12-14

Ezekiel is of a priestly family and was among the captives who were carried off to Babylon in 597 B.C. He is called “The Prophet of Divine Fidelity” because he emphasizes the fact that God is faithful in His threats as well as in His promises. He kept up the courage of his fellow captives by foretelling the doom of Babylon, the end of the captivity, and the redemption of mankind by the Messiah. He is said to have died a martyr.

Today’s reading takes place in Babylon, and Ezekiel is led out by the spirit into a plain (on which may have remained the unburied bones of those who had fallen in battle. [This is the passage which led to the old Negro spiritual “Dem Bones”.] These are the words which lead up to today’s reading (Ezekiel 37:1-11): ¹ *The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the LORD and set me in the center of the plain, which was now filled with bones.* ² *He made me walk among them in every direction so that I saw how many they were on the surface of the plain. How dry they were!* ³ *He asked me: Son of man, can these bones come to life? "Lord GOD," I answered, "you alone know that."* ⁴ *Then he said to me: Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!* ⁵ *Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life.* ⁶ *I will put sinews upon you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put spirit in you so that you may come to life and know that I am the LORD.* ⁷ *I prophesied as I had been told, and even as I was prophesying I heard a noise; it was a rattling as the bones came together, bone joining bone.* ⁸ *I saw the sinews and the flesh come upon them, and the skin cover them, but there was no spirit in them.* ⁹ *Then he said to me: Prophecy to the spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the spirit: Thus says the Lord GOD: From the four winds come, O spirit, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life.* ¹⁰ *I prophesied as he told me, and the spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright, a vast army.* ¹¹ *Then he said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They have been saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off."*

This mystical experience symbolizes his mission to the exiles: through his prophesying, they will receive a new spirit that will enable them to rise from their lost hope and to lead a new life in the land of Israel.

¹² Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel.

Israel has been totally destroyed by an attacking army, but it will be restored. No reference to the resurrection of individuals from death is intended.

¹³ Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! ¹⁴ I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the LORD. I have promised, and I will do it, says the

LORD.

The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruah*. God's breath. The aim of the prophecy is to give the captives new spirit to rise from their captivity. Although not referring to the resurrection of individuals, the concept is not far removed.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:8-11

In Romans 5:1-11 Saint Paul announced that justified Christians have been empowered to live a new life as the result of God's love manifested in the liberating acts of Christ. Now that liberation from sin, death, and the Law has taken place, they are able to live this life "for God", whose love is poured out through the dynamic principle of such life, the Spirit of God Himself. Christian existence is dominated by the Spirit, not the flesh.

⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ But you are not in the flesh;

Paul chooses a neutral way of expressing the goal of human life: to please God. It is a goal aimed at by both Jew and Christian, yet it cannot be attained by one who is dominated by self (in the flesh); one must be "in the Spirit" i.e., live according to the Spirit.

"The apostle does not reject the substance of flesh but shows that the Spirit must be infused into it."
[Saint Irenaeus (A.D. 180-199), *Against Heresies*, 5,10,2]

on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you.

The Spirit, as the new principle of Christian vitality, is derived from God, the same source as all other manifestations of salvation. The baptized Christian is not only "in the Spirit", but the Spirit is now said to dwell in him or her.

Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Note how Paul interchanges the "Spirit of God", the "Spirit of Christ", and "Christ" as he tries to express the multi-faceted reality of the Christian experience of participation in divine life. Attachment to Christ is only possible by the "spiritualization" of human beings. This is no mere external identification with the cause of Christ, or even a grateful recognition of what He once did for humanity. Rather, the Christian who belongs to Christ is the one empowered to "live for God" through the vitalizing influence of His Spirit.

¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

Here, Paul equates Christ and Spirit and plays on the meanings of the Greek word *pneuma* which means "breath" and "spirit". Without the Spirit, the source of Christian vitality, the human body is like a corpse because of the influence of sin, but in union with Christ the human spirit lives, for the Spirit resuscitates the dead human being through the gift of uprightness. As a result of the sin of Adam death entered the world and is the earthly legacy of us all. In union with Christ our spirit lives

beyond this earthly legacy and enters into eternal life.

“Paul is not saying here that the Spirit is Christ but is showing rather that anyone who has the Spirit has Christ as well. For where the Spirit is, there Christ is also. Wherever one person of the Trinity is present, the whole Trinity is present too. For the Trinity is undivided and has a perfect unity in itself.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, 13]

¹¹ If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,

The power of animating the Christian is thus traced to its ultimate source, for the Spirit is the manifestation of the Father’s presence and power in the world since the resurrection of Christ and through it.

the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also,

The future tense refers to the role of the Spirit in the end times resurrection of Christians

through his Spirit that dwells in you.

At His resurrection Christ became, through the Father’s glory, the principle of the raising of Christians. It is the Spirit as related to the risen Christ that is the life giving principle. Because of the gift of the Spirit the Christian is a child of God, adopted and destined for the glory of God’s intimate presence.

Gospel - John 11:1-45

Today we complete our “short course” in the faith. After rehearsing briefly the story of God’s saving acts and tying those saving acts to our baptism/confirmation, we look this week at the concept of resurrection in Christ. Our first reading told of God raising up the dry bones of Israel and restoring the people. That reading ended “I will put my Spirit in you that you may live . . .” Our Epistle reading told us of the new life and spirit given by the Lord. This is both a gift and a confrontation, however. To receive the gift, we must change our perspective of life and accept a whole new reality. Our gospel reading today tells of the resurrection of Lazarus when Jesus tells us “I am the resurrection and the life.” This is the longest continuous narrative in John outside of the passion account. It is the climax of the signs and leads directly to the decision of the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus.

¹ Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

The name “Lazarus” means “God has helped” (Hebrew: *Eleazar*). By the way the sacred writer introduces the village, he expects us to know who Martha and Mary are (Luke 10:38-42 where Jesus is a guest and teaches in their house) . The name today is El-Azariyeh (an Arabic corruption of the name Lazarus). It is less than two miles southeast of Jerusalem, separated from it by the Mount of Olives.

² Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill.

There are a number of women in the Gospels who are called Mary. The Mary here is Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, the woman who later anointed our Lord, again in Bethany, at the house of Simon the Leper. "She was the one who anointed" expresses an action which occurred prior to the time of writing, but the anointing took place after the resurrection of Lazarus. Were Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the "sinful" woman who anointed Jesus' feet in Galilee (Luke 7:36) one, two, or three women? It seems most likely that they are all different people. Due to the times, locations and details reported the anointings at Bethany and Galilee are believed to be two separate anointings. Nothing given about Mary Magdalene links her to the other two Marys.

³ So the sisters sent word to him, saying, "Master, the one you love is ill."

The sisters' message simply states the facts. The sisters' request, like the Blessed Virgin's at Cana, is implicit in their words.

⁴ When Jesus heard this he said, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Like Cana, Jesus' first reply appears to be a rejection of the request.

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

John is careful to point out that it was not lack of love for Lazarus and his sisters that caused Him to delay going to him. The reason for the delay will become apparent later in this narrative.

⁶ So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?"

The disciples are reminding Him that His life is in danger there (John 10:31, 39).

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

Jesus' answer uses the image of His coming (and impending departure) as light of the world (John 9:4-5). The phrase "the light is not in him" may reflect the ancient Jewish belief that there was a light within the eye which allowed a person to see (see also Luke 11:34; Matthew 6:23).

¹¹ He said this, and then told them, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." ¹² So the disciples said to him, "Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved." ¹³ But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep.

The pattern of dialog often depicted in John is followed: Jesus makes a statement regarding a profound religious truth which is misunderstood in a surface and material sense. This misunderstanding permits the Lord (or John at times) to develop further the truly spiritual meaning of His pronouncement.

¹⁴ So then Jesus said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. ¹⁵ And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him." ¹⁶ So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go to die with him."

Didymus is the Greek word for twin; Thomas is derived from the Aramaic word for twin. In the ancient Syriac version and in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas (80:11-12) his given name, Judas, is provided. Thomas' words remind us of the Apostles saying at the Last Supper that they would be ready to die for their master (Matthew 26:31-35). We have already seen how the apostles stayed loyal when many disciples left our Lord after His bread of life discourse (John 6:67-71).

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

This underlies the reality of Lazarus' death. Contemporary Jewish belief was that the soul of the dead remained in the vicinity of the body for three days and then departed. Some commentators take the day Jesus was notified (v4), the two days more that He stayed (v6) and this four days; add them and show that the resurrection occurred on the 7th day.

¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away. ¹⁹ And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother.

Mourning rites usually extended seven days from the time of death.

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

One who is well known for His miracles should have been able to heal Lazarus. Martha confesses a faith in Jesus that recognizes that God is the source of Jesus' powers. This separates her from those crowds that are amazed by Jesus' deeds and divided over His identity.

²² (But) even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus' words to Martha have elicited an expression of her belief in the resurrection of the dead in the end times; a doctrine held by the Pharisees.

²⁵ Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus affirms Martha's belief in a resurrection to come, with the significant addition that its power is to be found in Himself. Physical death is the common lot of mankind, Christians included, but faith in Christ will bring the believer to life again in the resurrection. Since the believer already possesses true or eternal life, physical death can never really affect him.

²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

Martha confesses her faith in these Christian truths, using the formulas with which she was familiar from Old Testament expectation. She still has not been told that Lazarus will rise here and now as a sign.

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, "The teacher is here and is asking for you." ²⁹ As soon as she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ For Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still where Martha had met him. ³¹ So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary's greeting is almost the same as Martha's. She too confesses a faith in Jesus that recognizes that God is the source of His powers.

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled,

Literally, "He snorted in spirit and was deeply troubled". Perhaps in anger at the presence of evil (death). With these actions even the crowd is able to recognize that Jesus "loved" Lazarus.

³⁴ and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." ³⁵ And Jesus wept.

Verse 35 is the shortest verse in Holy Scripture. In many translations it is only the two words "Jesus wept".

³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him." ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?" ³⁸ So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days."

Jesus' command to remove the stone provides one last occasion to remind the readers of how long Lazarus has been buried.

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?"

Only the disciples (in v4) had been explicitly told that the death of Lazarus is for the "glory of God".

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. ⁴² I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me."

Jesus is not play-acting. His visible thanksgiving to the Father however, is necessary to bring out the truth that in His works He is not simply a man endowed with wonder-working power but the

emissary of the Father of life.

⁴³ And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

A dramatization of John 5:28 "the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice." (See also Daniel 12:2).

⁴⁴ The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." ⁴⁵ Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

As is usual in the gospels, this narrative of the marvelous is brought to a matter-of-fact conclusion with no attempt to satisfy idle curiosity about incidental details.