

the Sunday Readings



Lazarus, come out! (John 11:43)

5th SUNDAY OF LENT (A)

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*Jesus: Resurrection and Life*¹

introduction

Death is present in the journey through the desert and in many ways it is also present on our daily path. The LORD liberates us from death. Encountering Jesus in baptism is encountering the face of *the GOD of the Living*. Each of the readings present some human problem for which the response might be; "*What do I do here?*" None of the texts directly answers the question. These are matters in which human beings find themselves helpless to deal with.²

first reading: Ezekiel 37 : 12 – 14³ [the outcome of the prophesy of the Valley of Dry Bones]

"Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the LORD GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.(12) And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.(13) I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.(14)

The news came to Ezekiel that Jerusalem had fallen.⁴ With the fall of the holy city in 587, public life in Judah came to an end. The city was destroyed; the temple burned; the royal dynasty of David ended; and the leading citizens deported. In the midst of this crisis of life and faith, symbolised by the valley of dead bones, Ezekiel speaks out of the old tradition about a new possibility.

A two-fold task faces the people of Judah. First, they have to let go of the old world of king and temple that the LORD GOD had taken from them. And second, they have to receive from the LORD 's hand, a new world which they did not believe possible and which was not their preferred or chosen world. Ezekiel had earlier warned the holy city's inhabitants to turn away from the distortions of idolatry and turn to GOD's rule if they wanted to live.⁵ The prophet's threat was that GOD's holiness would neither tolerate idolatry, nor idolatry's spin-offs – unjust land and sexual arrangements.

1 Cover Image: [The Raising of Lazarus](#) icon written by Kost Markovych – from the Edinburgh School of iconography.

2 Today candidates for baptism consider the implications of believing in *the GOD of the Living*. In a third scrutiny the community prays for an end of belief in and reliance on, a culture of death. Meeting Jesus in baptism, is as it was for the family of dead Lazarus, meeting the face of the GOD of the Living. Candidates for baptism, along with all the baptised, wish to deepen their commitment to and reception of, the offer of new life from *the GOD of the Living*.

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

4 *Ezk.33:21-22*

5 *Ezk.18:30-32*

In *chapter 18* Ezekiel catalogues the qualities of righteousness. Right sexuality and right economics mean that the holy GOD intends that the two key neighbour questions be sorted out on the basis of a right settlement of the GOD issue. If the holy city and its inhabitants don't turn to right sexuality and economics then the holiness of GOD will let even precious Jerusalem die without any tears being shed! 587 was the realisation of this threat. The known world collapsed. Now according to Ezekiel's new WORD, it is to be left behind.

The new WORD from the LORD concerns a new world given by GOD, which is to be received by a society paralysed by its disorientation. The new gift of the LORD, surprisingly makes a new form of life possible in the world, just when all seemed ended. Death and the collapse of social arrangements are real. But that is not the last word. GOD's freedom is at work in Israelite public life. A new people and a new political reality is promised and will be given. In imagery of resurrection (of bones rattling and air stirring) the prophet speaks about the end of exile and a return to the land of destiny. It is possession of the land that fully permits the LORD and the Israelite people to have a history together. Ezekiel's speech visions a future beyond exile.

Resurrection is the gift of power to the powerless and the invitation to the dispossessed to enter the new power, freedom and life, found in a secure place. In the Scriptures the resurrection theme is expressed as the call to exiles to leave exile and return home. What is anticipated in the message of the prophet isn't remote from the new era about which Jesus told stories. It will be an era when people act willingly under the rule of GOD.

response: Psalm 130 : 1 – 8

[waiting for Divine Redemption]

Out of the depths

I cry to you, O LORD.(1)

LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!(2)

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

LORD, who could stand?(3)

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.(4)

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;(5)

my soul waits for the LORD

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.(6)

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.(7)

*It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.(8)*

A prayer of repentance and trust in the Holy One. The psalm moves from an individual speaker in the depths of desperation, to a general repentance and trust that encompasses the whole people. Aware of unfaithfulness, the speaker is equally sure of the LORD's answer to repentance. The rescue and forgiveness of the one voicing the hurt before the Holy One permit the whole community to "*get a new life!*" Because of this bold cry from '*the pits*' all the Israelite people wait for liberation. The speaker alone in the depths, risks enough to cry out. The good news is that the cry is answered by forgiveness which sets new life in motion for a new community.

second reading: Romans 8 : 8 – 11

[the Spirit dwells in you]

. . . And those who are in the flesh cannot please GOD.(8) But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of GOD dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.(9) But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.(10) If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.(11)

In Paul, there's a strong link between *life in the Spirit* and *persecution*. The community in Rome had experienced the hatred of unbelievers and some repression from the government. Although the era of the followers of Jesus being sent to the lions was years in the future when the letter was written. Paul affirms, to the victims of this current animosity, a hope-filled message. The hope of newness, enables them to endure the suffering that goes with living a spiritual life in a unspiritual world.⁶ He affirms what Ezekiel assured the exiles – that GOD gives life in the midst of a culture of death.

Paul expresses the full meaning of the coming newness. It will only be in the context of the working of GOD's generous rule, which creates a new and faithful Israelite people. The Israelite belief is that whole person – body, soul and spirit – is subject to decay and death. But according to Paul, Christ has broken this bondage to decay and death, by his resurrection from the dead, in which he was raised to a totally transformed existence. Through baptism believers receive the indwelling Spirit. The outcome of this reception is the beginning of the resurrection and renewal of the whole person; body and soul.

The bodies of Christians are still subject to sickness, decay and death. But the indwelling Spirit is a sign promising the beginning of a new life that cannot be destroyed by death. The same divine power which raised Jesus is active in the baptised. The Christian believers are the community upon whom the winds of

⁶ Rm.8:17

God's Spirit blows anew and anticipates a complete renewal of life that will come at the general resurrection.

The apostle points out the correct path to holiness. Through the redemptive work of Christ, Christians have been liberated from the forces of sin and death. Holiness was impossible so long as the flesh, or our *'old self'* – that is, self-interested hostility toward GOD (v.7) – frustrated the divine plan expressed in the law. Sin used the law to break out into all manner of lawlessness (v.8). All this is now changed. At the cross GOD broke the power of sin and pronounced sentence on it (v.3). Christians still retain the flesh, but it is alien to their new being; which is *life in the spirit* – namely *the new self* – governed by the holy Spirit. Under the direct influence of the holy Spirit, Christians are able to fulfill the divine will that formerly found expression in the law (v.4). The same Spirit who enlivens Christians for holiness, will also resurrect their bodies at the last day (v.11). Christian life is therefore the experience of a constant challenge to put to death the evil deeds of the body, through *life of the spirit* (v.13).

gospel reading: John 11:1–45

[the death of Lazarus]

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.(1) Mary was the one who anointed the LORD with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.(2) So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "LORD, he whom you love is ill."(3) But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for GOD's glory, so that the Son of GOD may be glorified through it."(4) Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,(5) after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.(6) Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."(7) The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"(8) Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.(9) But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."(10) After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."(11) The disciples said to him, "LORD, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."(12) Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.(13) Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead.(14) For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."(15) Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."(16) When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.(17) Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,(18) and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.(19) When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.(20) Martha said to Jesus, "LORD, if you had

been here, my brother would not have died.(21) But even now I know that GOD will give you whatever you ask of him."(22) Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."(23) Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."(24) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,(25) and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"(26) She said to him, "Yes, LORD, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of GOD, the one coming into the world."(27) When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."(28) And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.(29) Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. (30) The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.(31) When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "LORD, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."(32) When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.(33) He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "LORD, come and see."(34) Jesus began to weep. (35) So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"(36) But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"(37) Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.(38) Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "LORD, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."(39) Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of GOD?"(40) So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.(41) I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."(42) When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"(43) The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."(44) Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.(45)

The dead man's sister, Martha, rebukes Jesus, but affirms her faith in the resurrection of the dead (v.24). Martha was thinking of the last judgment when tombs would be opened and the dead raised up. Jesus tells her resurrection has arrived and there is little sense in waiting for a last judgment and that all who believe in him, though they die, will live (v.26). Jesus is the incarnation of *the GOD of the Living*. Those who believe him, believe his message of life. This is resurrection now. Martha was saddened by the idea that her brother would rise up on the last day. He would rise up only to die again in a few years and then he'd

have to be resurrected after all on the last day. Jesus tells her something that scandalises every religious person: *"the last judgment is the doctrine I bring for society – I am the last day!"*

Physical death we might call individual death.⁷ Maybe Jesus wept for the death of a friend! Maybe he wept because his disciples didn't have faith in him and in the newness his coming brought. Some ancient manuscripts don't say Jesus was saddened but that he was angered. That might have been the original version. It is stronger and its more likely a copyist corrected '*angered*' to '*saddened*'. Whether Jesus was sad or angry, the fact is that afterwards he wept at the tomb. In spite of Jesus being the resurrection and the life, we need to be freed from our conditioning that prevents us from understanding the new era.⁸

for sharing:⁹

- *The promises of the past help us to understand the promises of Jesus in the present. Comment on Ezekiel 37 : 12 - 14.*
- *If we believe in Jesus, we re-define living and dying completely. Comment on Romans 8 : 8 - 11*

7 The individual dies but we go on living joined to humanity which is joined to Jesus. Each person dies but humanity is destined to live forever. Body cells die each moment but the body goes on living. We die as individual cells but we can go on living with a super-individual life - the life of the body (humanity) if there is love in us. Love is what keeps the organism alive. The organism is the Body of Christ which has eternal life. The unity of humanity remains and that's the life Jesus talks about.

8 Jesus suffuses history, culture, economics, race, and sex, with new meaning. Resurrection is a new understanding of this world transformed, free, enduring and communal. When Martha protested about going to Lazarus' tomb, Jesus reminded her of his earlier promise to believers about seeing '*the glory of GOD*' (v.40). In the Scriptures the '*glory of GOD*' is the triumph of GOD over oppression. When the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea, freeing themselves from Egypt, the Bible account says they saw '*the glory of GOD*'. The '*glory of GOD*' is any victory of justice over injustice. In the Scriptures, '*the glory of GOD*' is GOD's appearance in history. The GOD of Israelite and Christian Scripture is essentially liberating. Jesus tells Martha that if she believes, she will see that '*glory*' in the resurrection of her brother. Lazarus symbolises the transformation of humanity.

9 Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'

- *Share how our daily 'deaths' can be integrated into a life-giving spirited pattern of loving and being loved. Comment on John 11 : 1 – 45*

prayer:¹⁰

*Merciful GOD,
You showed Your glory to our fallen race
by sending Your Son to confound the powers of death.
Call us forth from sin's dark tomb.
Break the bonds which hold us,
that we may believe and proclaim Christ,
the cause of our freedom and the Source of Life,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty GOD, now and always. Amen.*

review:¹¹

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10 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

11 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.