

readings of Holy Week



**Remember how he told you, . . . that the Son of Man
must be handed over to sinners and be crucified &
on the third day rise again (Luke 24: 5-7)**

the Easter Vigil (c)

VIGIL OF EASTER

*look for Jesus among the living*¹

introduction

The Easter Vigil is the feast of fire, light, and water; or, more exactly, the feast of the Risen Christ; energy; enlightenment; and life for all.² We are incorporated into Christ through baptism, which has its most appropriate framework at the Easter Vigil. We gather in darkness, to prepare to celebrate the dawning of Easter; the celebration of fulfillment of the ancient promises of liberation from the powers of death, in God's triumph, in Jesus.

first reading: Genesis 1 : 1 – 2 : 2³

[Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath]

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.(1) The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.(2) And God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light.(3) And God saw that the light was good;(4) God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.(5) And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."(6) So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.(7) God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.(8) And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.(9) God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.(10) Then God said, "Let the Earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.(11) The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.(12) And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.(13) And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be

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- 1 Cover Image: Icon of the "Anastasis" or "Resurrection" – also referred to as the "Descent Into Hades." The victorious Christ, resplendent in gold garments, cross in hand, is depicted shattering the gates of the biblical realm of the dead (*sheol* in Hebrew; *hades* in Greek; often, though imprecisely, translated as "Hell") decisively and forcefully grabbing Adam and Eve – representative of humanity and the righteous awaiting deliverance (cf. *Hb.11:39-40*) – by the hand and pulling them out of this darkened realm restored to fellowship with God.
 - 2 The selection of readings for inclusion in the Easter Vigil needs to be fitted into the available time. For example, if 45 minutes is considered the length of time for the Liturgy of the Word section of the vigil, the choice needs to allow for a leisurely pace combining the chosen readings with silent periods, prayers and some hymns. Only a good balance of readings, silences, explanations and prayer, can achieve the hearing of the Word of God with profit at any time. It is especially so on this the most important of all the vigils of the Church year.
 - 3 *Gn.1:1-2:2* is an introduction to the whole Pentateuch. It shows how God brought an orderly universe out of primordial chaos.

for signs and for seasons and for days and years,(14) and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the Earth." And it was so.(15) God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars.(16) God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the Earth,(17) to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.(18) And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.(19) And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the Earth across the dome of the sky."(20) So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.(21) God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the Earth."(22) And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.(23) And God said, "Let the Earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the Earth of every kind." And it was so.(24) God made the wild animals of the Earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.(25) Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the Earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the Earth."(26) So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.(27) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth."(28) God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the Earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.(29) And to every beast of the Earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the Earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.(30) God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.(31) Thus the heavens and the Earth were finished, and all their multitude.(2:1) And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.(2)

The text contrasts an Israelite future characterised by the Lord's blessing with the chaotic present, which is formless, empty and dark – the experience of exile in Babylon. The priestly editors account is an artistic statement designed to give a sense of serenity, order, and control, in the same way the story of God's creative

life-giving power brings shape to the original chaos. The Lord's grace transforms the old world of chaos and exile.⁴

The Lord's new history will bring blessings and a secure place for all the insecure and adrift ones. The same power for blessing was announced to Noah's family, who trusted God amid the chaos (*Gn.9:1:7*). It was announced to Abraham (*Gn.16:2*), Jacob (*Gn.28:3-4* & *35:11*), to Joseph (*Gn.47:27* & *48:3-4*) and to the liberated ones in Egypt. In these passages, the writers assure that the Israelites can rely on God for their secure place in the world where the Lord. Humankind presides over this world as God's agents. People are to subdue the Earth so that what it contains is, '*fruitful and multiplies*'. Its to be a non-exploitative way of acting. The world-making is done by the Lord through human activity.⁵ But the Lord authorises it and is known to be present within it.

response: Psalm 104 : 1 – 2, 5 – 6, 10, 12 – 14, 24, 35b

[God, Creator & Provider]

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,(1)
wrapped in light as with a garment.(2) . . .
You set the Earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.(5)
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.(6) . . .
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills(10) . . .
By the streams the birds of the air
have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.(12)
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the Earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.(13)
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use.(14) . . .
O Lord, how manifold are your works!
in wisdom you have made them all;
the Earth is full of your creatures.(24) . . .
Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord.(35b)*

The psalmist celebrates the goodness and awesomeness of the Lord's creation. Its a hymn of praise to God who easily and skillfully made rampaging

4 [v.2a] '*The deep*' - the primordial ocean according to the ancient Semitic theory of the creation of the universe. After the Lord's creative activity, part of this vast body forms the salt-water seas (*Gn.1:9-10*); part of it is the fresh water under the Earth (*Ps.33:7*; *Ezk.31:4*), which wells forth on the Earth as springs and fountains (*Gn.7:11*; *8:2*; *Pr.3:20*). Part of it, "*the upper water*" (*Ps.148:4*; *Dn.3:60*) is held up by the dome of the sky (*Gn.1:6-7*), from which rain descends on the Earth (*Gn.7:11*; *2 Kg.7:2, 19*; *Ps.104:13*).

5 [v.26] Humanity is here presented as the climax of God's creative activity; a human person resembles God primarily because of the dominion given by God over the rest of creation.

waters and primordial night into a world vibrant with life. The speaker describes God's splendor in the heavens (vv.1-4), how the chaotic waters were tamed to fertilize and feed the world (vv.5-18), and how primordial night was made into a gentle time of refreshment (vv.19-23).⁶ The psalmist reacts to the beauty of creation with awe (vv.24-34). It is a statement about creation's order, symmetry and majesty reflecting that the Lord is known to be confident and at ease; delighting in the Lord's own handiwork. This awareness leads to spontaneous wonder, gratitude, and praise. The world is 'a well-parented' free gift. But the gifting comes with an expectation and a cost! Every generation learns what the first humans in the garden learned (*Gn.2-3*); that the nurturing holy ONE has not abdicated rule. In the reign of delight, the parental will must be honoured.

second reading: Genesis 22 : 1 – 18

[the command to sacrifice Isaac]

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."(1) He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."(2) So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. (3) On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.(4) Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."(5) Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.(6) Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"(7) Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.(8) When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.(9) Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.(10) But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."(11) He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."(12) And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.(13) So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide;" as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."(14) The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven,(15) and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not

⁶ The picture is like *Gn.1:1-2*; a dark and watery chaos is made dry and lighted so that creatures might live.

withheld your son, your only son,(16) I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,(17) and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."(18)

The story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, develops a new understanding of the God of the Israelites. The agents of God's forward movement, are tested. God had previously tested Abraham by calling him from Mesopotamia (Cf. *Gn.12*) and required him to endure a famine. Abraham seems to have failed that test. Now he meets angelic visitors who announce Isaac's birth. Again, Abraham is tested. Isaac had seemed to be the child of God's future.⁷ But in the test, the Lord asks Abraham to sacrifice this child of promise. Abraham *'fears the Lord'*, carrying out the details of the preparations to the letter. His faithfulness is answered by the Lord's renewed promise.

Abraham's obedience and *'fear of the Lord'*, becomes the basis of the blessings of Covenant.⁸ When the Abraham stories were brought together with the covenant traditions, vv.15-18 were probably added. These verses re-affirm the covenant with the promise that all the nations of the Earth are to be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Christians see this promise is fulfilled in Jesus. Abraham's obedience and *'fear of the Lord'*, which like Jesus of Nazareth's obedient death, reaffirms the ancient covenant.

response: Psalm 16 : 5, 8 – 11

[a song of trust and security in God]

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.(5) . . .
I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand,
I shall not be moved.(8)
Therefore my heart is glad,
and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.(9)
For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.(10)
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forever more.(11)*

A song of trust expressing the speaker's faith in the Lord's life-giving power. The focus is on the enhancement of the covenant relationship. The speaker affirms a secure relationship to the Lord, the giver of the land, (v.6) and blesses God for a sustaining presence. God's goodness and steadfastness is found to be

7 [v.2] *'Only son'* - uniquely precious, especially loved; therefore the same term is rendered in *Gn.22:12,17* as *'beloved'*.

8 [v.14] *'The Lord will provide'* - *Yahweh-yireh* is an Hebrew expression meaning, "*YHWH will see;*" the reference is to the words in v.8, "*YHWH will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*"

adequate in the face of every threat to life threatening situations (vv.8-11) the poet knows that the powerful solidarity of the Lord more than over-rides any threat.⁹ The whole memory of Israelite history presses the speaker towards trusting in God. Trust is based on God's presence and the speaker delights in it.

third reading: Exodus 14 : 15 – 15 : 1

[the Israelites cross the Red Sea; their pursuers drown]

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.(15) But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.(16) Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.(17) And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers."(18) The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. (19) It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness,¹ and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.(20) Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.(21) The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.(22) The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.(23) At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.(24) He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."(25) Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."(26) So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea.(27) The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.(28) But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.(29) Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.(30) Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.(31) Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord; "I will sing to the Lord, for he

9 [v.10] 'Or let your faithful one see the Pit' - is an Hebrew *shahath*, which means here, *the pit*, a synonym for *Sheol*, the underworld. The Greek translation derives the word here and elsewhere from the verb, *shahath*, "to be corrupt." On the basis of the Greek, Ac.2:25-32; 13:35-37 apply the verse to Christ's resurrection, "Or let your holy ONE experience corruption."

has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."(15:1).

The desperate minority community of slaves and midwives, for whom Moses is the spokesman, do not see how a newness can come, or how the evil can be overcome, or how they have a future out of the totalitarian present in Egypt under the Pharaoh. Moses addresses these fears, to the throne of God, who then declares that the religious claims of the Egyptian gods have been nullified. The faith of Moses and the Israelites, to break away from the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation, is vindicated in the new reality that emerges out of the Exodus experience. The '*salvation*' of the Israelites through the crossing of the Sea against all odds, proves the sovereignty of the Lord to all (vv.16-18). The marginal ones had appealed to the truly free and sovereign God when they were exploited and oppressed and the Lord asserts that sovereignty (vv.24-31).

The story of Exodus shows a radical criticism and dismantling of empirical power. In the beginning the Egyptians are in full power. They act as masters of their own destiny (Ex.5:7-10). By the end of the story, the hard-driving taskmasters are vanquished, humiliated and removed from history. The religious claims of the Egyptians' gods have been nullified by the Lord, the God of true liberation. New energy is released to trust in the darkness. The Israelite's God, in the dark moments of the people's history, proves more powerful than the other gods who seem to rule in the light.

response: Psalm = Exodus 15 : 1 – 6, 17 – 18¹⁰

[the song of Moses]

*I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.(1b)*

*The Lord is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;*

*this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.(2)*

The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.(3)

*Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.(4)*

The floods covered them;

they went down into the depths like a stone.(5)

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power -

your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.(6) . . .

You brought them in and planted them

on the mountain of your own possession,

the place, O Lord, that you made your abode,

¹⁰ Ex.15:1-21 a canticle (used in Christian liturgy) celebrating the Lord's saving power; miraculously delivering the people from their enemies, and leading them to the victorious conquest of the Promised Land.

the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.(17)

The Lord will reign forever and ever.(18)

A hymn of praise is the final full act of the new humanity in freedom and justice now possible. The poetry evokes this alternative against a management mentality that seeks control and mastery. Speaking the name anew of the free and holy One, redefines the Israelite preception of social reality. The energy that moves the Israelites comes out of the freedom of God. The singers focus on the free ONE. In their singing they appropriate the freedom of the Lord as their own freedom. The singing reviews their unlikely history. It is a history that would never be taught in the imperial schools of Egypt. The singing culminates in the enthronement of the Lord. That is the reality that the Egyptian empire could not permit or tolerate.

fourth reading: Isaiah 54: 5 – 14

[the eternal Covenant of Peace]

For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.(5) For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God.(6) For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you.(7) In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.(8) This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you.(9) For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.(10) O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires.(11) I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your walls of precious stones.(12) All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.(13) In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you.(14)

The prophet reflects the Israelite experience of being in trouble and coming through it. There will be a coming home from exile. Prior to this poem the prophet has attacked and dismantled both the gods and the political apparatus of empire. His intention is to create space in which the Israelites can see that the claims of the empire are now void. This new awareness allows and requires new actions. Isaiah introduces the theme of *wife-Sarah-Israel* abandoned, deeply grieved, and cast off (vv.5-6). This is the experience of Israel in exile. But the abandoned one is now called, acknowledged, and reclaimed for relationship. Exile is acknowledged as a reality. It is caused by God. But the poet does not dwell on

exile. It is the reality of the divine everlasting love that, "*gathers back*" the Israelites and ends the exile (vv.7-8).

Isaiah then links the Flood and the Exile. The Exile is parallel to the Flood in terms of the effects of disorder and chaos. But the Exile, like the Flood, is ended by the faithful promise of the Lord (vv.9-10). The poet dares to assert that God's covenant loyalty is more reliable than the mountains and hills and more durable than creation. Second Isaiah affirms that in the heart of God, there is no break in the history of compassion and fidelity. The Lord's comforting in the past is the ground for present hope (vv.11-17). The restoration of the city is announced, the next generation will be comforted and prosperous and there will be the absence of oppression, fear, and terror and finally the Israelites will be vindicated.

The poetry moves from memory to historical possibility. Just as the shamed, barren woman is given children, so the desolate abandoned city is given protection and well-being. The city, destroyed by Babylon won't stay destroyed but is now guaranteed a new well-being in the face of the empire. It is the memory of God's previous liberating activity that permits the poet to voice the new possibilities out beyond the empire.

response: Psalm 30 : 1, 3 – 5, 10 – 12

[thanksgiving for recovery from grave illness]

*I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.(1) . . .
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.(3)
Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.(4)
For his anger is but for a moment; his favour is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.(5) . . .
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!(10)
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,(11)
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks for you forever.(12)*

The speaker has been given a new lease of life. The psalmist needs to tell in detail the rescue that has just been accomplished. Its a resurrection from the dead. The speaker invites the general community to join in the praise because the thanks are more than an individual person can adequately render. The thanks is more than mere gratitude. It is a confession that those who speak, are committing themselves to the divine Other. To thank is to make a commitment to *the Source of Life*. Only those who remember their pre-rescue state, can thank adequately. The reason for gratitude is that the disorientation has been powerfully overcome. The Lord transforms and because of the new life given only by the Lord, silence is impossible!

fifth reading: Isaiah 55 : 1 - 11

[an invitation to abundant life]

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.(1) Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.(2) Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.(3) See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.(4) See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.(5) Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;(6) let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.(7) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. (8) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.(9) For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,(10) so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.(11)

The alternative reality, suggested by the prophet, is the memory of *manna*. That memory becomes the basis of hope, many centuries later, in the midst of exile. The poet wants the listeners to imagine a situation in which bread can be given to the hungry outside the delivery system of Babylonian control. The poetry is addressed to those who had accepted the Babylonian reality, inviting the listeners to disengage from it. The poetry amounts to delegitimising that authority (vv.3b-5). Isaiah dares to think about a future time when there will be no hunger because food will be given for everyone. It will be the fulfillment of the Word of promise in the Covenant relationship. It will show that the Lord is in control, delivering to the people, what Babylon clearly can't deliver. The exiles feel abandoned and believe that ancient Covenant had failed. There was little to attract them in the prophet's words of invitation. But the prophet affirms that the Lord's word of commitment to the Covenant promises is alive and still in effect (v.3).

The Word of God is now to be expressed in the rise of Persia under Cyrus.¹¹ The prophet insists that the old traditions count, so he declares that *Exodus* (*Is.43:1-7*) is still the characteristic way that the Lord acts. Having said that, the present moment brings the old tradition to fruition, the prophet calls Israel-in-

11 Cf. *Is.45:1*

exile to make a decision (v.6). It is possible to act as though the Lord is not in charge of history and stay in exile, or to affirm God's reign and risk going home – even if led by a despised non-Israelite (*Is.45:9-13*). Obviously the decision is based on how the people discern the present and trust the tradition. The prophet can only set the issue.

Homecoming is a community owning a new world which can be embraced in liturgy and can be practised concretely here and now. Poems of alternative worlds present the greatest threat to the empire, especially poems that speak about a new economy. The prophet's Word invites those who are beaten, broken and despairing to a return in imagination to where work and life are not lived in vain. The Word of the prophet attests that this dreamed-of new world is more powerful, more humane and finally, more real, than the world of the empire where God doesn't rule.

response: Psalm = Isaiah 12 : 2 – 6

[thanksgiving and praise]

*Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.(2)
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.(3)
And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.(4)
Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.(5)
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.(6)*

The speaker expresses hope that all distortions will be overcome. It is a world where there is no cause for anxious greed, for all will be shared, and all will have enough. That's a deep threat to the way we have organized the world. Yet it is a new world that liberates, and for which we yearn - like the speaker. It's a world free of restlessness and greed, where we can sing and pray about the coming of God's reigning. The speaker expresses the hope that the entire world is now safely held in the promise of the Lord. In the coming world of God's reigning, there can be joy and trustful security.

sixth reading: Baruch 3 : 9 – 15, 32 – 4 : 4¹²

[in praise of Wisdom]

*Hear the commandments of life, O Israel; give ear, and learn wisdom!(9)
Why is it, O Israel, why is it that you are in the land of your enemies, that
you are growing old in a foreign country, that you are defiled with the*

¹² *Ba.3:9-4:4* - *Baruch* assumes the exiled and oppressed Israelites are waiting for the restoration of Jerusalem's fortunes. In fact the people had long before returned from exile. But the writer finds it necessary to remember the hope that had accompanied Jerusalem's restoration, because in the meantime the people's fervour for Torah-keeping had lost its intensity.

dead,(10) that you are counted among those in Hades?(11) You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom.(12) If you had walked in the way of God, you would be dwelling in peace for ever.(13) Learn where there is wisdom, where there is strength, where there is understanding, that you may at the same time discern where there is length of days, and life, where there is light for the eyes, and peace.(14) Who has found her place? And who has entered her storehouses?(15) . . . , But the one who knows all things knows her, he found her by his understanding. He who prepared the earth for all time filled it with four-footed creatures;(32) the one who sends forth the light, and it goes; he called it, and it obeyed him, trembling;(33) the stars shone in their watches, and were glad; he called them, and they said, "Here we are!" They shone with gladness for him who made them.(34) This is our God; no other can be compared to him!(35) He found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to Jacob his servant and to Israel whom he loved. (36) Afterward she appeared upon earth and lived with humankind.(37) She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures for ever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die. (4:1) Turn, O Jacob, and take her; walk toward the shining of her light.(2) Do not give your glory to another, or your advantages to an alien people. (3) Happy are we, O Israel, for we know what is pleasing to God.(4)

In the vision of Daniel there is an image of the Human one (Son of man) being led into the presence of the One of Great Age and there receiving sovereignty, glory and power.¹³ The dream of oppressed Israelites was to live under the Lord's rule in God's city. Jerusalem symbolised such a place, where inequality and injustice would cease. Baruch's poetry seeks to inspire the present Jerusalem-dwellers with the same enthusiasm that inspired the first Israelite returnees; the experience of God's glory in lives free from inequality and injustice. Such was the original experience of covenant-keeping in restored Jerusalem. If the Lord's rule wasn't recognisable in Jerusalem, it would hardly be recognisable anywhere else.

response: Psalm 19 : 7 – 10

[God's glory in creation and the Law]

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;(7)
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;(8)
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.(9)
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.(10)*

The speaker affirms that the revealing of Torah to Moses on Mt.Sinai was not so much something new as it was a clarification of the mystery which surrounds all peoples. Torah-keeping is an invitation to find the Lord. This way of invitation is to be esteemed above all other earthly values. The Israelites discerned that Torah-

¹³ Dn.7:13

keeping is a matter of the Lord's *shalom* (*peace*). God's peace is a gift; a creation which is not negotiable or at human disposal. The principles of justice and righteousness in the gifted-Torah cannot be compromised. In honouring Torah, creation is enhanced. The agent of vision sees things rulers do not. The agent of vision has the delicate task of holding together God's will for creation. Torah-keeping is especially the giving of power to the powerless ones. It revives souls, makes the simple wise, rejoices hearts and enlightens eyes. The demands of Torah-keeping remind, that creation is the Lord's - not humankind's. Faithful Torah-keepers are not free to do what they will with their power, where ever they are. This is what the agent of vision always says to the agent of order.

seventh reading: Ezekiel 36 : 16 – 28

[the renewal of Israel]

The word of the Lord came to me:(16) Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.(17) So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. (18) I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them.(19) But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, "There are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land."(20) But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.(21) Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God; It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.(22) I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes.(23). I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.(24) I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.(25) A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.(26) I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.(27) Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.(28)

The Lord's new act is on a different basis. It is no longer to value a people or even to keep a promise, but it is for God's own sake and reputation (*Ezk.36:20-28*). If a new history is now to begin, the ground for it must be rooted in God and not in the Israelites. Nothing is required or expected of them. The will for land by them is rooted in the Lord's very character as a covenant-maker and keeper. God no longer thinks that obedience will yield a new existence in the land.

The motif of repentance is transformed to that of gifting, 'a new heart and new spirit' (v.26). Now the possibility of land is exclusively God's initiative. The Lord works, as it were from both sides of the relationship; not only to address the Israelites but also to assure their response. "You shall dwell in the land" and "You shall be my people and I will be your God", go together (v.28). The idea of being in a place and being in a covenant relationship with God, go together. The prophet cannot imagine covenant apart from the land. Therefore what follows is not only about covenant, but about land. The description of land echoes the imagery of creation as well as the speeches on the threshold of taking possession of the promised land in Genesis.¹⁴

response: **Psalm 42 : 1 – 2, 4 & 43 : 3 – 4**¹⁵

[longing for God and His help in distress]

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.(1)
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?(2) . . .
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.(4) . . .
O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.(43:3)
Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.(4)*

The speaker laments being absent from Jerusalem and being excluded from worship in the Temple. It is another expression of the felt need for the 'new heart' of Ezekiel. The speaker expresses the worshipper's sense of God's felt absence and longs to participate in the liturgy and be restored to the presence of the holy One.¹⁶ It is another reference to the need for the new heart of Ezekiel. Participation in the action around the altar would mark the supreme moment when those who have been alienated are able to share in the action where sins are forgiven through the power of the holy ONE.

new testament reading: Romans 6 : 3 – 11

[dying and rising with Christ]

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?(3) Therefore we have been buried with him

14 Cf. Gn.1:22 & 8:17

15 Pss. 42 & 43 form a single lament in three sections, each section ending in an identical refrain (Pss.42:6, 11[12]; 43:5). The psalmist is in the extreme north of Israel, far from Jerusalem, and longs for the divine presence that Israel experienced in the temple liturgy. Despite sadness, the psalmist hopes once again to join the worshipping crowds.

16 [v.2] 'Behold the face of God' where 'face' designates a personal presence (cf. Gn.33:10; Ex.10:28-29; 2 S.17:11). The expressions, "see God/God's face" occurs elsewhere (Ps.11:7; 17:15; 63:2; cf Ex.24:10; 33:7-11; Jb.33:26) for the presence of God in the temple.

by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.(4) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.(5) We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.(6) For whoever has died is freed from sin.(7) But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.(8) We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.(9) The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.(10) So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (11)

Paul links forgiveness of sins and the freedom from sin very closely to Baptism (vv.3-7). In our world it is difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in business without cutting corners. If dishonesty does not enter into the process of production and sales, there is a tendency to cheat on taxes. This attitude is so widespread that it is taken completely for granted. In '*accepted practices*' we have an example of what Paul means by the '*compulsive*' and deadly power of sin. Such dishonesty is condoned by society. Everyone tacitly conforms. Christians, imbued with Jesus' spirit/Spirit from the gospel, immediately become aware of this pressure once they try to resist sin. To be under pressure is to be unfree, because '*freedom from*' implies lack of compulsion or restraint. Yet Christians are told every Sunday, that simply because they have been baptised, they are free. When they venture to express doubts, they are merely told they must strengthen their faith by prayer.

Paul's point in relating '*freedom from*' sin to baptism (v.4) is clear when we recognise that baptism is *a rite of initiation*. It is the solemn entrance into the community of believers. It is by focusing on this aspect that we can begin to understand how the apostle conceived '*freedom from*' sin. Paul inherited from his Israelite background the idea that the new community of God's *Messiah*, would be entirely free from sin. Ezekiel clarified that tradition and promise, with the words, "*I will put my spirit within you . . .*" (Ezk.36:27).

From Paul's perspective, the Christian community is an environment in which no one sins; in which all are authentic; and no one lives inauthentically (vv.8-11). The apostle envisaged individuals being changed by absorption into the unity of the Christian community. For Paul, "*being alive in Christ Jesus*" (v.11) is understood as referring to the community.¹⁷ It is in the communal Christ that new being becomes

¹⁷ God's display of generosity or grace is not evoked by sin but, as stated in *Rm.5:8* is the expression of God's love, and this love pledges eternal life to all believers (Cf. *Rm.5:21*). Paul views the present conduct of the believers from the perspective of God's completed salvation when the body is resurrected and directed totally by the holy Spirit. Through baptism believers share the death of Christ and thereby escape from the grip of sin. Through the resurrection of Christ the power to live anew becomes reality for them, but the fullness of participation in Christ's resurrection still lies in the future.

possible. The veil of sin and death is lifted, by the implication that the liberated one gains membership of the Christian community. Paul often terms the community, '*Christ*', enabling his readers to make sense of the expression, "*to be baptised into Christ*" (v.3). It simply means to be admitted into the community through submission to the sacramental rite of initiation. *The power-for-life* of the risen Christ operates through this communal act, enabling those initiated to "*die to sin and rise to newness of life*" (v.4). In other places, Paul speaks of, "*putting on Christ*." What Paul has in mind is clarified by the parallel expression, "*You have put on a new self*".¹⁸ The '*new self*' can only be the community. Christ is the new humanness which is the community. That means in practice that, '*to put on Christ*' is '*freedom for*' an alternative life of neighbour love.

response: Psalm 118 : 1 – 2, 16 – 17, 22 – 23

[a song of victory]

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!(1) Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."(2) . . .
The right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."(16)
I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.(17) . . .
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.(22)
This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.(23)*

A song of thanksgiving sung by one whose life has been under threat, and who has now been delivered by God. The original setting was most likely Jerusalem, at a time of special significance – the autumn festival – "*the day that the holy One has made*" (v.24). In that setting, '*the gate of the Lord*' (v.20) is the gate of the city or of the temple. The speaker's hopeless position has been transformed by the Lord's radical intervention. In the context of Easter, the modern Christian community reads this song as the voice of Jesus, who has been beset by the powers of death. It is only by the greater power of God that the life of Jesus is wrenched out of the grip of death. "*YHWH is my strength . . . , my might . . . , my salvation*" (v.14) echoes the language of Moses, who celebrated the Lord's massive defeat of the Egyptians (Ex.15:1-3).

The Lord's recent rescue becomes the speaker's ground for hope. '*The righteous*' does not necessarily mean the good and the pious. The righteous are those who have been rescued and vindicated by God (v.20). The rescued community consists of those who have known the Lord's massive intervention on their behalf and who

But life that is lived in dedication to God now is part and parcel of that future. Hence anyone who sincerely claims to be interested in that future will scarcely be able to say, "*Let us sin so that grace may prosper*" (cf Rm.6:1)

18 Cf. Col.3:10

now live their lives in a delighted response to their rescue. They are 'righteous' because of what they have received, rather than because of what they have done.

gospel reading: Luke 24 : 1 – 12

[the resurrection of Jesus]

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.(1) They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,(2) but when they went in, they did not find the body. (3) While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.(4) The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.(5) Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,(6) that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."(7) Then they remembered his words,(8) and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.(9) Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.(10) But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.(11) But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. (12)

The women had observed Jesus' death and burial. Jesus had said, "*The Human one (Son of man) must suffer and die and then rise on the third day.*" Luke implies by this mention of the tomb being empty, that Jesus has changed from earthly teacher and healer, to *the exalted Human one*, who will deliver all, "*the Father had promised*" to those who will know him in *the breaking of the bread*.¹⁹ Through his suffering, Jesus has become *the Risen Christ and Lord*.²⁰ Death no longer holds Jesus in its grip. This news is proclaimed first to pious, observant Jewish women, who happen to be followers of Jesus. Two men in gleaming robes tell the women that they should remember what Jesus had told them when he was with them in Galilee. Having recalled his words, the women carry back the report to the Eleven and the others.

Having come from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus does not return there in Luke's account. Jerusalem is the focal point here and in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Luke has chosen to eliminate the accounts of the appearances of Christ in other areas, in the interest of his overall theme. The account ends with the mention of the disciples spending their time in the Temple of Jerusalem, "*constantly praising God*".²¹ This brings the gospel narrative to a close in the area in which it began; the first episode dealt with Zechariah's service in the Jerusalem Temple (cf *Lk.1:5-24*), during which the birth of John the Baptist was announced.

¹⁹ Ac.1:4

²⁰ Ac.2:36

²¹ Lk.24:53

For the women, the issue is not the empty tomb and whether Jesus has risen from the dead. It is whether they are willing to believe that this Jesus is *the Human one*. If they believe that, the resurrection will be no problem, for it would be inconceivable to them that *the Son of man* could fail to make his appearance. The new item for faith, then, is that *the Son of man*, instead of first appearing in glory at the end of the age, should be identified with *Jesus of Nazareth* and that he makes his appearance '*on the third day*'. Even the dedicated followers find it difficult to comprehend this victory over death. It is one thing for would-be disciples to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. But such a belief wouldn't necessarily imply a decision concerning his meaning for faith. It is another matter to accept the fact that *the Human one* is Jesus.

prayer: ²²

*Dear friends in Christ, on this most holy night
when Jesus Christ passed from death to life,
the Church invites us to come together in vigil and prayer.
This is the passover of the Lord:
if we keep the memory of his death and resurrection
by hearing his Word and celebrating his mysteries,
then we may be confident
that we shall share his victory over death
and live with him for ever in God. Amen.*

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22 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.