

the Sunday Readings



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3rd Sunday of Easter

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obey God; not human authority.¹

introduction

John's gospel had already presented two appearances of the Risen Jesus. Firstly, to Mary Magdalene and secondly, to the disciples gathered behind locked doors. In today's gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples who had resumed their daily work of fishing. In each of these appearance accounts, John points out that the Risen Jesus is at first not recognised. His resurrection doesn't appear obvious to his disciples. Yet he is there. His body bears the marks of the death he had endured. His presence reveals that life overcomes death.

first reading: Acts 5 : 27 – 32, 40 – 41²

[the apostles are persecuted]

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them,(27) saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us."(28) But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.(29) The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.(30) God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.(31) And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."(32) . . . , and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.(40) As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the same of the name.(41) And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. (41)

The apostles Peter and John had earlier been called before the Supreme Court to be interrogated about the healing of a lame man and in the presence of the priests, temple police and Sadducees.³ On that occasion Peter identified Jesus as, '*the Messiah*', who although not recognised by the Israelite leaders, immersed his disciples in the Lord's '*living Torah*' and brought the Lord's cause in history to completion. By their persistence in the telling of this '*good news*' about Jesus, the apostles provided an invitation to the Israelites to re-gather as a community

1 Cover image: Peter and Jesus: 12th century mosaic

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

3 Cf. Ac.3:1-10. When the Twelve immediately resumed public teaching, the Sanhedrin determined to invoke upon them the penalty of death (Ac.5:33) prescribed in Dt.13:6-10. Gamaliel's advice against this course finally prevailed, but it did not save *the Twelve* from the punishment of scourging (Ac.5:40) in a last endeavour to shake their conviction of their prophetic mission.

around the Torah values of joyful, liberated obedience. That aroused their opponents to act.

Peter and the other apostles had been apprenticed in Jesus' settled instincts and performance skills of the living Torah, so their practise produces in a new situation, the same prophetic activity by which people are attracted to the Torah which completes the conditions of the Lord's reigning. But they are accused of spreading a message, *'in the name'*. Their message was promoting the skills of Jesus for living the Torah of the God of history. The apostles affirm the value of their practice. For them it was a matter of obedience. It was not an attack on the guilt or otherwise of their opponents. Obedience to Jesus' message demanded a response of practical faith in the Lord's revelation in history.

The preaching of Peter and other apostles, empowers for a new future that is linked to the power of God to work, *"miracles, portents and signs,"* culminating in the resurrection.⁴ Thus the Spirit of Jesus leads to a discernment and reception of God's crucifixion; of God's raising the crucified One to glory. Obedience means that Peter and the apostles act, *"in the name"(of Jesus)*, inviting Israelite religious leaders to change their negative attitude towards the Jesus-Movement. The Sanhedrin had Peter and the apostles flogged and released, with a prohibition to speak, *"in the name."* God's *power for life-giving* raised up Jesus, *"the Saviour of humankind!"* Despite persecution, apostles consider obedience to Jesus' Spirit is the physical side of this salvation in the religious sense. Obedience is faithfulness to God's way of the future. According to Peter and the apostles, the power and authority of the God of history is revealed by Jesus' prophetic practice. The duty of a disciple is to proclaim Jesus' name boldly. No religious or secular authority can compel silence. This proclaiming liberates and cures. It opens up the power for life-giving and newness, at the same time as it awakens fear and opposition.

response: Psalm 30 : 1, 3 – 5, 10 – 12⁵

[a song at the dedication of the temple]

*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.*

⁴ Ac.2:22-24

⁵ The Psalm is an individual thanksgiving: praise and thanks for deliverance and restoration (vv.2-4); an invitation to others to join in (vv.5-6); a flashback to the time before deliverance (vv.7-11); a return to praise and thanks (vv.12).

*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 to You forever.(12)*

The traditional Israelite response to the Lord's actions was praise and thanksgiving. They noticed a change in their community's fortunes and attribute the turn-around to God's power for life-giving. The traditional Psalms of Praise receive new impetus in the light of Jesus' resurrection. A song of thanksgiving – because the Lord has rescued the speaker from death. It's also an invitation to the faithful, rescued ones, to do the same. The speaker sketches the history of the relationship with the Lord. From well-being, to the "*pits of Sheol*" and then, to "*new life*"! Because the new life is given only by the Lord, silence is impossible – sullenness, depression, numbness and despair are ended. The response to this inexplicable and unexpected new life is the speaker's confession of thankful praising. The voicing of such gratitude is a sign of commitment to the new life which is only possible among those who vividly remember their situation before their rescue. The speaker wants to keep the memory alive, so that the transforming moment is kept alive too. In that moment are found both the empowering for life and the reasons for passionate praising of the Lord.

second reading: Revelation 5 : 11 – 14

[the reading of the Scroll and the Lamb]

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,(11) singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"(12) Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!"(13) And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshipped.(14)

The Seer describes a papyrus scroll in God's right hand (v.1) with seven seals indicating the importance of the message. An angel asks who is worthy to open the scroll.⁶ There is despair at first, when no one in creation can do it (vv.3-4). But the Seer is comforted by an elder who tells him that Christ, called '*the lion of the*

⁶ i.e., who can accomplish God's salvific plan (v.2)

tribe of Judah, has won the right to open it (v.5). The Seer dares to imagine that even beyond human sight, the triumphant community (that means our treasured dead) are still singing, 'at the throne!' Praise goes on, because the reliable solidarity of *God-with-us* goes on.⁷ The faithful ones' singing continues to be responsive to God's continuing solidarity! Life finally ends in praise.

The theme of this praise is: "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and his Christ and God will reign for ever and ever*".⁸ The scene before the throne sharply contrasts with the present situation of the community. Forces of evil are at war with the Christian movement. All seems contrary to the promise of glory heralded by Christ's resurrection. By presenting the final outcome of this struggle, the Seer's vision rather than offer an escape, presses the conviction that the song of praise goes on because the "*fear not*" solidarity of *God-with-us* goes on! This vision encourages faithful disciples in the midst of persecution. This vision extends a powerful word of hope to all who suffer.

gospel reading: John 21 : 1 – 19⁹

[Jesus appears to seven of the disciples]

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.(1) Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.(2) Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.(3) Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.(4) Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."(5) He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.(6) That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.(7) But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.(8) When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.(9) Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."(10) So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.(11) Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him,

7 Christ then appears as a Lamb, coming to receive the scroll from God (vv.6-7), for which he is acclaimed as at a coronation (vv.8-10).

8 *Rv.11:15*

9 In *John* 20:1-23 there are many non-Johannine peculiarities in this chapter, some suggesting Luke's Greek style; yet this passage is closer to John than *Jn.7:53-8:11*. There are many Johannine features as well. Its closest parallels in the synoptic gospels are found in *Lk.5:1-11* and *Mt.14:28-31*. Perhaps the tradition was ultimately derived from John but preserved by some disciple other than the writer of the rest of the gospel.

"Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.(12) Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.(13) This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.(14) When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."(15) A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."(16) He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.(17) Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."(18) (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."(19)

Earlier the disciples had a special evening meal with Jesus before his death. This appearance of Jesus is linked to a meal theme with strong eucharistic allusions. At the time of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (beside the same lake) the gospel account uses the same words to describe Jesus' action.¹⁰ And again in the appearance to the disciples at Emmaus. Now the gospel uses the same words (v.13).¹¹

Jesus has everyone taking part in a common meal – a communion! In the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus states that the communion of the community of disciples was *'his body'*. Now he has that communion with them in the bread and fish. The Risen Jesus is experienced in eucharistic gatherings. This is the point of departure for the disciples, whose task is to now transform the world. Setting out on a mission of transformation is linked to eucharistic meals.

This tradition concerning a miraculous catch of fish, is an appropriate image for the task of including new-comers in the Christian community. The netting of fish isn't an appropriate image for the on-going care of those who are so brought in. In the gospel narrative, the image changes as Jesus ignores the fish and begins to instruct Peter to feed his lambs (v.15).

The time-honoured image in the Scriptures of on-going care of those who are brought into the community, is *'shepherding'*. The Johannine imagery shifts from *'Peter the fisherman'* to *'Peter the shepherd'*. But before Simon Peter is assigned the role of *"tending sheep"* he is asked insistently, *"Do you love me?"* According to

¹⁰ Jn.6:11

¹¹ The total of seven may suggest the community of the disciples in its fullness.

the narrative, if authority is given, it must be based on love of Jesus. And Jesus continues to speak of: "*My lambs,*" "*My sheep.*"

The members of the community continue to belong to the One who said, "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know Me.*" (v.14) Jesus' conversation with Peter includes multiple questions and answers bearing on an apostle's role. In place of a net full of fish, the metaphor for community is now '*a sheepfold*'. If Peter assumes the shepherding role, he must meet the Johannine qualifications for shepherding. These are; that "*the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*".¹² Having instructed Peter three times to, "*feed*" or "*tend the sheep,*" in the next breath, Jesus tells him about the way in which he will be put to death! This death will be the proof that in Peter's role as shepherd, loving discipleship has been given priority.¹³

for sharing:¹⁴

- *The apostles are persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Comment on Acts 5 : 27 – 32, 40 – 41*
- *The Christian community echoes the certitude of final communion each time it prays the Lord's Prayer. Comment on Revelation 5 : 11 - 14*
- *Jesus becomes known to us through a communion of humble but necessary things. Comment on John 21 : 1 – 19*

prayer:¹⁵

*God life, in Your risen Son
You reveal your abiding presence among us
and summon those reborn in baptism
to lives of worship and service.*

¹² Jn.10:11

¹³ Jn.13:5 & 15:13

¹⁴ 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*'.

¹⁵ 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.

*Fill this assembly with reverence
as we come before You in prayer.
Grant us courage and zeal
in bearing witness before the world
to Your Son, Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead,
who lives and reigns with You now and always
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:¹⁶

The Easter text proclaim that the identity and the calling of the community is founded on a concrete miracle that can only be attested sacramentally. For those desiring a deeper commitment, the world is not what it appears to be. Powers that seem to be in charge, ideologies that seem compelling, requirements that seem non-negotiable are all subverted by a profound transformation that is at the same time inclusive and enduring. The Eucharistic action like the proclamation in the texts of the Liturgy of the Word is not an end in itself. The end of the sacramental reality is the generation of a transformed world.

The community that gathers during the Easter season gathers with the purpose of continuing the practice of the Risen Jesus. In the presence of the Risen Christ, the liturgy invites us to walk in the power of his Spirit and to produce fruit.¹⁷ Practise of the virtue of hospitality counters our world bent on vengeance. We hear texts that invite us to go out from our gatherings to spread the transforming presence that we ourselves have tasted in Word and Eucharist. Our acting upon the practice of Jesus, that is, welcoming outsiders, ends the danger of the rites of Holy Week becoming meaningless and empty gestures. Beyond the traditional ceremonies and prayers by which we commemorate the death of Jesus, the liturgical texts invite us to test what we can do for one another.

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¹⁶ Review of the Week – 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.

¹⁷ Cf. *Ga.5:22-24*