

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday Of Lent
29 March 2020



*“I am the resurrection and the life.
If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live,
and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”*

Collect

By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God,
may we walk eagerly in that same charity
with which, out of love for the world,
your Son handed himself over to death.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Readings and Commentaries

Are we fully alive, or are we dwelling among the dead? That's the question posed by the word of God for today. To which we might give an immediate reply, "Of course we're alive!" Today we are challenged to think twice before responding so categorically.

Some of our patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving may not be life-giving at all, though this fact may escape us. Without realising it, day after day and for better or for worse, we take on board the values and assumptions of our culture. Insofar as these persuade us to pursue our own self-interest, to put our energies into material security and social status, to defend ourselves from the claims of others, we are dwelling among the dead.

But if we have the courage to look more deeply into our lives and see how imprisoned we are in our cocoons of comfort, we will be thrilled today to hear Ezekiel and Jesus commanding us to come forth from our graves. We will rejoice when Jesus declares: "Unbind him, let him go free".

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel

37:12–14

The Lord says this: I am going to open your graves; I mean to raise you from your graves, my people, and lead you back to the soil of Israel. And you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people. And I shall put my spirit in you, and you will live, and I shall resettle you on your own soil; and you will know that I, the Lord, have said and done this – it is the Lord who speaks.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 129

R. With the Lord there is mercy
and fullness of redemption.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,
Lord, hear my voice!

O let your ear be attentive
to the voice of my pleading. **R.**

If you, O Lord, should mark our guilt,
Lord, who would survive?

But with you is found forgiveness:
for this we revere you. **R.**

My soul is waiting for the Lord,
I count on his word.

My soul is longing for the Lord
more than watchman for daybreak.
(Let the watchman count on daybreak
and Israel on the Lord.) **R.**

Because with the Lord there is mercy
and fullness of redemption,
Israel indeed he will redeem
from all its iniquity. **R.**

First Reading

If ever there was an occasion to go to the Bible and read the full story from which the lectionary selects only a part, this is it. Today's reading contains only the final few verses of Ezekiel's marvellous vision of the valley of dry bones. It is an imaginative tour de force. Step by step the countless dry bones abandoned in a valley are clothed with sinew, flesh and skin, then have the breath of life breathed into them. The people who have been brought back to life are promised the fulfilment of their dreams: to return from exile and settle in their homeland once again.

Those who have gone to the trouble of reading the story in full will be in a much better position to proclaim the concluding verses which constitute the first reading. The message should be clear. God is promising to bring a people back to life and fill them with the spirit of life. Originally addressed to the Jewish exiles in Babylon who felt they were as good as dead, this word is spoken again to us today.

Several of the phrases in the reading are repeated. These are meant to heighten the dramatic impact of God's pledge to his people. The speech units in the reading are all short; each one should be given the emphasis it deserves.

Responsorial Psalm

Along with last Sunday's psalm, today's is one of the best known. The opening words, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord", are familiar to many even beyond the circle of believers. Often identified by the first words of the Latin text, "De profundis", it is one of the seven psalms called penitential.

Being quite short, the whole psalm is prayed today. There is a distinct movement from the pleading of the first verse and a half through to the confident trust of the remainder. This should be evident in the way the psalm is proclaimed. The response is taken from the latter part of the psalm; it is an expression of sure faith.

**A reading from the letter of
St Paul to the Romans**

8:8–11

People who are interested only in unspiritual things can never be pleasing to God. Your interests, however, are not in the unspiritual, but in the spiritual, since the Spirit of God has made his home in you. In fact, unless you possessed the Spirit of Christ you would not belong to him. Though your body may be dead it is because of sin, but if Christ is in you then your spirit is life itself because you have been justified; and if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John**

11:1–45

[There was a man named Lazarus who lived in the village of Bethany with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and he was ill. It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair.]

Second Reading

In contrast to the preceding Sundays, today all three readings are inter-connected. They are all linked by the theme of life. In this short excerpt from his letter to the Romans Paul plays with a series of contrasts. On one side he puts the unspiritual (which the NRSV translates more concretely as “flesh”) along with death and sin; on the other he puts the Spirit of God (or of Christ), life, justification and resurrection.

Untangling these threads and discerning Paul’s precise chain of thought isn’t easy, even if we can get the general gist of his argument. It is worth the reader’s effort to study the text and write out the essence of Paul’s teaching here. One way of putting it goes like this: Jesus who died has been raised by the Spirit; the Spirit that raised Jesus now dwells in our mortal bodies and gives them life; in this Spirit we are made just in God’s sight; our life is now “life in the Spirit”.

If the reader is clear about this, then there is a better chance that the congregation will grasp the point, even if they may not be able to follow Paul’s rather circular logic. The reading conveys good news. It should be proclaimed in that spirit, with clarity and deliberation. It can’t be said often enough – the congregation only gets one chance to hear it.

For those using the NRSV text it may be helpful to understand that when he contrasts “flesh” and “spirit” Paul is not using philosophical distinctions between body and mind. We human beings always live “in the flesh”; the question is whether in our bodies we are governed by sin or by the Spirit.

Gospel

We come to the third and last of the dramatic stories selected from the gospel of John for the Sundays of Year A. We have already encountered Jesus as living water and as light of the world; now we meet him as resurrection and life.

The sisters sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill.' On receiving the message, Jesus said, 'This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.'

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judaea.'

[The disciples said, 'Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews wanted to stone you; are you going back again?' Jesus replied:

'Are there not twelve hours in the day?
A man can walk in the daytime without
stumbling because he has the light of this
world to see by;
but if he walks at night he stumbles,
because there is no light to guide him.'

He said that and then added, 'Our friend Lazarus is resting, I am going to wake him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he is able to rest he is sure to get better.' The phrase Jesus used referred to the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by 'rest' he meant 'sleep', so Jesus put it plainly, 'Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.' Then Thomas – known as the Twin – said to the other disciples, 'Let us go too, and die with him.']

On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. [Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to sympathise with them over their brother.] When Martha heard that Jesus had come she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you.' 'Your brother' said Jesus to her 'will rise again.' Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said:

'I am the resurrection and the life.

If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live,

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?'

'Yes, Lord,' she said 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.'

As with the previous stories John weaves together an appealing human story and profound theological teaching. He does this so well that we are moved to admiration of his extraordinary skill.

Once again pastoral considerations will play their part in determining whether the longer or the shorter version is read. A comparison of the two will quickly reveal what has been omitted from the shorter version. What has been left out, for example, includes the opening verses of the chapter. Without these to set the context, the shorter version begins rather abruptly.

There appear to be two climaxes in the story. One is the exchange between Martha and Jesus. He identifies himself as "the resurrection and the life", prompting Martha to confess, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who is coming into the world". The second is Jesus summoning Lazarus out of the tomb and bidding the onlookers, "Unbind him, let him go free". What wonderful words with which to conclude this splendid story!

[When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, 'The Master is here and wants to see you.' Hearing this, Mary got up quickly and went to him. Jesus had not yet come into the village; he was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were in the house sympathising with Mary saw her get up so quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who followed her,] Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, 'Where have you put him?' They said, ['Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept; and the Jews said,] 'See how much he loved him!'

But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?' Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha said to him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day.'

Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said:

'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.
I knew indeed that you always hear me.
But I speak for the sake of all these who
stand round me,
so that they may believe it was you
who sent me.'

When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, here! Come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.' Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what he did believed in him.

[*Short Form: omit text in brackets.*]

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches.

*We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day, but especially on Sunday
29 March which will be marked as a National Day of Prayer in this time of crisis.)*