

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year A

26 March 2023



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.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Two imperious commands bring the story of Lazarus to a dramatic climax. The first is Jesus' charge to his dead friend, "Lazarus, here! Come out!" The second is his order to the on-lookers, "Unbind him, let him go free". The first testifies to Jesus' power over life and death, the second implicates us in the service of others' freedom. Each gives food for thought.

The first invites us to muse on how much we dwell in the realm of life and how much in the realm of death. Paul wrestles with this question in the early chapters of his letter to the Romans. Long before that, Moses put it to the people in these words: "I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then . . ." (Dt 30:19). That's what Lent is all about, choosing life.

Paul has something else to say in a passage from Romans often used at funerals: "The life and death of each of us has its influence on others" (14:7). When we choose life and embrace our freedom, we help set others free from the unseen web of death in which they are entangled. Life and freedom are Jesus' gift to those who want them enough.

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.**

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.] 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:

First Reading

It's widely understood these days that the Paschal Vigil lies at the heart of the liturgical year, but its counterpart – the Vigil of Pentecost – is more like a best-kept secret. The lectionary offers a number of readings that can be used for an extended liturgy of the word on the eve of Pentecost. One of those readings is the full account of Ezekiel's vision that we only hear the conclusion of today.

Readers who check out the story in full (37:1–14) will be rewarded. In his vision Ezekiel sees a valley full of dead bones. Gradually, step by step, the bones are covered with sinew, flesh and skin and then brought to life by the breath of God. It's a powerful oracle of encouragement for the demoralised exiles of Israel who feel they are as good as dead. It promises them new life, return to their homeland, and fresh adoption as God's people.

Today's reading comprises the final three verses of the vision. Without the dramatic build-up, their impact is diminished but they still convey a strong message of hope. Even in this short text there is a degree of repetition. This story-telling device serves to reinforce the message and shouldn't be hurried through. The reading is in the form of a solemn pronouncement by the Lord. It should be delivered with strength and seriousness.

Responsorial Psalm

After the communal breadth of Ezekiel's vision, there's a striking shift to the individual in Psalm 129/130, the whole of which serves as the responsorial psalm. The change of focus isn't immediately obvious, as the response is wide in scope. Verses one and three, however, are the prayerful cry of an individual in great distress. Verses two and four embrace the community again, as the personal experience of deliverance gives the psalmist grounds for assuring the whole people of mercy and redemption.

The image of the watchman waiting for the dawn to break could imply that the psalmist has spent the whole night in a vigil of prayer. As already noted, there is a marked shift in tone in the course of the psalm. It begins in anguish but moves progressively towards the confident trust of the final verse.

Good readers will be sure not to conflate the two lines of the response into a single flat sentence. In praying the verses they will take care to communicate the psalm's full emotional range to the assembly. They will also be mindful of the extra length of the third verse.

'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.'

[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.]

Second Reading

Though this passage from Romans begins on a negative note (the unspiritual can "never be pleasing to God"), the message overall is decidedly positive. The Spirit of God, Paul writes, has "made his home in you". Through the Spirit believers are justified and belong to Christ. In the final days, the Spirit living in them will give life to their "mortal bodies".

This affirmative view of Spirit and life is set against the "unspiritual" which means sin and death. Paul is not setting up a dichotomy between flesh and spirit, as if bodily life itself was an evil. He's contrasting life under the sway of sin with life governed by the Spirit. As is so often the case, Paul's thought doesn't run in a simple linear direction. It heads off on detours and sometimes reverses direction.

The NRSV lectionary helpfully sets the reading out in short lines. It would do readers no harm to do this exercise for themselves – even to re-order the units – so as to be clear about the key points Paul is making and how they inter-relate. This is especially the case with the second half of the reading which is a lengthy complex sentence in two parts. Readers must still proclaim the text as Paul wrote it, but if they have grasped its logic they have a better chance of illuminating it for the assembly.

Gospel

Apart from the intimacy of Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples, the story of the raising of Lazarus is the most deeply personal in John's gospel. We are told that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. He calls Lazarus his friend, and when he sees the tears of Mary and others, he feels great distress, sighs deeply, and weeps.

Yet for all this, John is not aiming to arouse our sympathy with a human-interest story. He has a much more serious purpose, that of shedding light on Jesus' true identity and summoning his readers to the fullness of faith. John gives an early clue to this in Jesus' decision not to go immediately to Bethany; what is at the forefront of Jesus' mind is the glory of God, not human consolation. John goes on, in verses we do not hear today, to report that the raising of Lazarus provoked the plot to kill Jesus. Ultimately, as the gospel as a whole testifies, the glory of God is made manifest in the death of Jesus.

The length of this story (the longest single narrative in John apart from the passion) presents one challenge, but another is the interweaving of its emotional and theological threads. Ministers of the gospel have to hold in balance its profound poignancy and its Christological testimony. As has been spelt out in the commentaries on the gospel stories of the past two Sundays, a choice has to be made between the full or the shortened version, as well as about the manner of proclamation. The guiding principle is what will be of most benefit for the assembly.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Bless, O Lord, your people,
who long for the gift of your mercy,
and grant that what, at your prompting, they desire
they may receive by your generous gift.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Prayer over the People for the Fifth Sunday of Lent,
Roman Missal p. 283.)