

WEEK 5 OF LENT

FIRST READING

Ezekiel 37:12-14

The Lord says this: I am now 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.

Romans 6:3-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him 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.

Romans 7:15-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

GOSPEL

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:

'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.

REFLECTION

This gospel is an introduction to the Holy Week and the Easter celebrations as it already anticipates the joy of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. In Christianity there are two resurrections which Christ speaks of: the first resurrection occurs when a person converts and leaves behind sin; when a person touched by the love of God is moved to conversion, and to abandon the living death which is the death which comes from a life of sin. A person who perseveres in the life of grace will find at the end of this life that he is welcomed into the presence of God for all eternity.

The most important work of this life is our conversion. The resurrection of Lazarus prefigures the spiritual resurrection of a person through the life of grace given in baptism.

What is conversion? St Paul in the two letters from the romans pinpoints the nature of this first resurrection which consists in becoming a new creation in Christ through baptism.

The first reading pinpoints our struggle to do good in an inner reality that lives in us which prevents us from doing good even if we want to!

Baptism represents our entry into the tomb of Christ as to be reborn through it to a new life. Baptism is not a one off event but a process by which charts puts to death the 'old man' or the 'old nature' , and a new creature is born founded on the resurrected Christ, able to live the new life in Christ without effort because a new creature is born in him.

All of us have an inner 'engine' which drives us and makes us act in a certain way. This was formed in us from the first moment of our conception, and the result of original sin into which we were born not knowing the love of God, and looking for happiness and the fulfilment of our legitimate desires for security, love and control. See the Appendix A below, which describes the three temptations of Satan, which addressed to our unconscious desires for love, security and control invite us to place our life in a false vision of happiness, and to live by it.

When we enter into the new life in Christ through baptism God places into our hearts a new 'engine' or principal of life called the HOLY SPIRIT, which if it grown in us gives us a radically new way of acting, and a power to act in a supernatural way because of the gift of God. Christian life is none other that acquiring this spirit and learning to live form it and through it.

In fact in the Orthodox tradition, Lazarus , who became a bishop, is said never to have smiled again when he returned from the dead, because he saw that even with the gift of forgiveness and redemption which Christ brought through his passion, some souls would not accept his mercy and would be lost.

The second resurrection will happen at the end of time when, when the bodies of all the dead, who souls have already been judged, at their first death, will rise again; in this moment their souls and their bodies will be re united, and they will receive the final word from God on their eternal destiny.

Next week we will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, which is a renewal of our baptism, a moment to grace , a moment to abandon sin and put ourselves at the feet of Christ. Let us reflect of this call to conversion.

QUESTIONS

1. DO YOU FIND YOURSELF INSIDE OF THIS STORY OF LAZARUS? DO SEE THAT GOD IS RAISING YOU FROM THE 'DEAD' SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING?

2. HOW DOES THE FORTHCOMING EASTER CELEBRATIONS FIND YOU? ARE YOU LOOKING FOR SOMETHING FORM THE LORD THIS EASTER?

3. WHAT EFFECT DID THE RESURRECTION HAVE ON THE APOSTLES AND DISCIPLES? WHAT DOES JESUS' THE RESURRECTION MEAN FOR YOU?

APPENDIX A – THE THREE TEMPTATIONS

All human beings are fundamentally motivated by a desire for three things: security, esteem or love, and a desire for a reasonable amount of control or power over our life. Satan understands very well our unconscious motivations, our desires for happiness, and seeks to reinforce all the false ways in which we look to fulfil these God given desires.

In the first temptation, *'turn these stones into loaves'*, Satan invites Christ to use magic to satisfy his immediate physical hunger which must have been quite great after forty days of fasting. Any delay in the prompt fulfilment of our physical desires by God, becomes an occasion to question God's love, and rebel against him. Lust, avarice and gluttony are the sins corresponding to this temptation.

In their journey across the desert, the people of Israel wanted to stone Moses many times, and often threatened to go back to Egypt and submit again to the yoke of slavery, rather than endure for a second the growth pangs which we necessary to cross the desert and enter the promised land. In other words they were willing to forgo all the blessings of the promised land, for the sake of immediate consolation and comfort.

We always want things now! We talk about the 'feel good factor'. Certain physical pleasures evoke in us a sense of well being, they allow us to forget the problems of life. Becoming addicted to this feeling, we then try to recreate the same experience which led to the pleasure in the first place. Then we are on the slippery path to addiction, which can take many forms, drugs, alcohol, sex, etc. Jesus responds to this temptation by trusting in the providential love of the Father, who knows what we need even before we ask him: *'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'*

The second 'temptation', corresponding to our need for control, is that of the 'power trip'. Not only tyrants such as Saddam and Stalin, succumb to this temptation, but so do we. It is the temptation not to serve, but to be served. The aim here is to manipulate those around us so that they fit into my project and plans for happiness. This is accomplished by a whole range of devices, from emotional blackmail to throwing tantrums. The sentiment here is that 'I am only loved' if everybody is doing what I want! No one can say 'NO' to us otherwise watch out! We would even, if we could get away with it, manipulate God, which is what magic, astrology and the occult attempts to do. Whole religions are based on this premise, offering sacrifice in order to placate a God and get him to do what you want.

Psalm 40 says *'sacrifice and offering you do not want, so I said here I am I come to do your will'*. God already owns all that is in the world, and cannot be bought. The sacrifice he looks for is a soul who out of gratitude to him, wishes to give up this desire to impose their will on everything and everybody, and enters into his will. The Christian discovers that true freedom comes not from imposing their own will, but in obeying God, and doing his will. Why? Because no one can deceive or trick God, what God wills most of all is our happiness, our flourishing as a human being. By entering into the will of God we gain our freedom, giving up our empty plans for happiness, which never succeed anyway. In doing this we share in God's creative power and his design for us and for the universe.

The final temptation, the most subtle of all, is that connected with the desire for 'love, esteem, adulation'. In this temptation is the beginnings of much depression, sadness, bitterness, and even suicide. This is a two pronged attack on Jesus' trust in the Father's love. Jesus is just about to start his public mission, and already Satan tells him that he is a failure, he speaks with the wrong accent, comes from a nobody town called Nazareth, is a carpenter. What a joke to think that he can be the Messiah, the Saviour of the world! Instead of going through the rejection of the people, the cross, why not instead go to the Temple at the hour of prayer, and assured of a good crowd, jump down like Superman. Then he would be a success, everybody will love him. There are two trains of thought here.

First Satan invites Jesus to look at his life, his history, past and future in a dim light. His birth to poor parents, his time in Nazareth, his education and now to cap it all, God is asking him to suffer rejection and die on the Cross. In effect what Satan is saying is that 'God does not love you, and here is the evidence – your life so far, and God's future plans for you'. As an antidote to all this lack of love, Satan says, why not put this so called love of God to the test. Jump! Force God to prove that he loves you. This is a serious temptation particularly for those who have traumatic lives, or have been hurt. The only defence to this temptation is prayer. In prayer God can shed light to this life our ours, helping us to understand it as he does, as a work of divine Art.

Which of these three describes your situation? Christ comes this Lent offering us a share in the spoils of this victory over these three temptations.
