

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Fifth Sunday of Lent

First reading

(Ezekiel 37.12-14)

The New Spirit

At the darkest moment of Israel's history, when they are hopeless exiles in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel foretells a rebirth.

In a great vision, of which we read only three paltry verses, he sees a valley full of dead bones. The Lord commands him to breathe on them and, in Hebrew, the same word is used for breath and Spirit. Ezekiel breathes on them the enlivening Spirit of the Lord. The bones come together, are covered with flesh and sinews, and become 'a great, an immense army'.

Directly, the prophet is foretelling the rebirth of Israel as a nation, that they will return to life once again in the Promised Land, given life as a nation once more.

We can, however, read this prophecy in the light of the biblical revelation as a whole, and see that it is hinting at and mysteriously suggesting a further meaning. In this fullness of meaning, the Church has always understood the prophecy as a promise of personal Resurrection through the Spirit of God.

We are on the threshold of the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ at Easter, and so of our own Resurrection. This reading links to today's gospel reading about the new life given to Lazarus.

Question:

What is this Resurrection to which we look forward?

Second reading:

(Romans 8.8-11)

The Gift of the Spirit

In the preceding chapters of the Letter, Paul has described and analysed the process of salvation through Jesus' offering of himself in loving obedience to his Father, and our own integration into Christ by being plunged into him in baptism, and so joining him in his death and Resurrection.

This eighth chapter is the chapter of the Spirit, considering how we are transformed by the Spirit of Christ, now become our own spirit, through which we live. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is already in us and is empowering us, but our bodies are not yet transformed, as they will be in the final Resurrection.

In the later Pauline epistles (Colossians and Ephesians), this is expressed differently: God has already brought you to life with Christ. You have already been raised up: it remains only for this risen life to be revealed with him in glory (Colossians 2.12; 3.4).

The Spirit of God and of Christ, described in the Johannine writings as the Paraclete or Helper, leads us into all truth, giving us an ever-deeper appreciation of God's gifts to us. The Spirit also gives us strength and zeal to do God's work in all our ways of life.

Question:

How can the Spirit change our lives?

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Gospel:

(John 11.1-45)

The Raising of Lazarus

The third of these great Johannine gospel readings on the Sundays of Lent, leading up to and preparing us for the baptisms of the new members of Christ at the Easter Vigil, grips us with the story of Jesus' gift of life to his friend Lazarus.

This is not the same as the gift of life to us by Jesus in the Resurrection, for Lazarus returns to ordinary human life, and will die again, whereas the Christian Resurrection transforms us into a new way of life, giving us a life that is a participation in the divine life. But the Resurrection of Lazarus is the last and greatest of Jesus' signs, his marvellous works that point towards and hint at this final gift of divine life.

The first of the signs was the transformation of the water of the Law into the wine of the messianic wedding banquet at Cana. These signs show us who Jesus really is. As well as showing the divine power of Jesus - for only God can give life - they also show the real, human love of Jesus for his friends. He is upset by Lazarus' death and weeps for him, sharing the human sorrow of his family as he shares our sorrows, too.

Question:

Is death something to fear?
