

## HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 21 March 2021

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

### PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY (Year A – Scrutiny Readings)

Lectionary: 34

#### Reading I Ez 37:12-14

Thus says the Lord GOD:

O my people, I will open your graves

and have you rise from them,

and bring you back to the land of Israel.

Then you shall know that I am the LORD,

when I open your graves and have you rise from them,

O my people!

I will put my spirit in you that you may live,

and I will settle you upon your land;

thus you shall know that I am the LORD.

I have promised, and I will do it, says the LORD.

#### Responsorial Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

R. (7) With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;

LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to my voice in supplication.

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

If you, O LORD, mark iniquities,

LORD, who can stand?

But with you is forgiveness,

that you may be revered.

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

I trust in the LORD;

my soul trusts in his word.

More than sentinels wait for the dawn,

let Israel wait for the LORD.

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

For with the LORD is kindness

and with him is plenteous redemption;  
And he will redeem Israel  
from all their iniquities.  
R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.

**Reading II Rom 8:8-11**

Brothers and sisters:  
Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.  
But you are not in the flesh;  
on the contrary, you are in the spirit,  
if only the Spirit of God dwells in you.  
Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.  
But if Christ is in you,  
although the body is dead because of sin,  
the spirit is alive because of righteousness.  
If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,  
the one who raised Christ from the dead  
will give life to your mortal bodies also,  
through his Spirit dwelling in you.

**Verse Before the Gospel Jn 11:25a, 26**

I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord;  
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will never die.

**Gospel Jn 11:1-45**

Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany,  
the village of Mary and her sister Martha.  
Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil  
and dried his feet with her hair;  
it was her brother Lazarus who was ill.  
So the sisters sent word to him saying,  
“Master, the one you love is ill.”  
When Jesus heard this he said,  
“This illness is not to end in death,  
but is for the glory of God,  
that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”  
Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.  
So when he heard that he was ill,  
he remained for two days in the place where he was.  
Then after this he said to his disciples,  
“Let us go back to Judea.”  
The disciples said to him,  
“Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you,  
and you want to go back there?”

Jesus answered,  
“Are there not twelve hours in a day?  
If one walks during the day, he does not stumble,  
because he sees the light of this world.  
But if one walks at night, he stumbles,  
because the light is not in him.”  
He said this, and then told them,  
“Our friend Lazarus is asleep,  
but I am going to awaken him.”  
So the disciples said to him,  
“Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.”  
But Jesus was talking about his death,  
while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep.  
So then Jesus said to them clearly,  
“Lazarus has died.  
And I am glad for you that I was not there,  
that you may believe.  
Let us go to him.”  
So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples,  
“Let us also go to die with him.”  
When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus  
had already been in the tomb for four days.  
Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away.  
And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary  
to comfort them about their brother.  
When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,  
she went to meet him;  
but Mary sat at home.  
Martha said to Jesus,  
“Lord, if you had been here,  
my brother would not have died.  
But even now I know that whatever you ask of God,  
God will give you.”  
Jesus said to her,  
“Your brother will rise.”  
Martha said to him,  
“I know he will rise,  
in the resurrection on the last day.”  
Jesus told her,  
“I am the resurrection and the life;  
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,  
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.  
Do you believe this?”  
She said to him, “Yes, Lord.

I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,  
the one who is coming into the world.”

When she had said this,  
she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying,  
“The teacher is here and is asking for you.”

As soon as she heard this,  
she rose quickly and went to him.

For Jesus had not yet come into the village,  
but was still where Martha had met him.

So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her  
saw Mary get up quickly and go out,  
they followed her,

presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him,  
she fell at his feet and said to him,

“Lord, if you had been here,  
my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping,  
he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said,

“Where have you laid him?”

They said to him, “Sir, come and see.”

And Jesus wept.

So the Jews said, “See how he loved him.”

But some of them said,

“Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man  
have done something so that this man would not have died?”

So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb.

It was a cave, and a stone lay across it.

Jesus said, “Take away the stone.”

Martha, the dead man’s sister, said to him,

“Lord, by now there will be a stench;  
he has been dead for four days.”

Jesus said to her,

“Did I not tell you that if you believe  
you will see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone.

And Jesus raised his eyes and said,

“Father, I thank you for hearing me.

I know that you always hear me;

but because of the crowd here I have said this,  
that they may believe that you sent me.”

And when he had said this,

He cried out in a loud voice,

“Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out,  
tied hand and foot with burial bands,  
and his face was wrapped in a cloth.  
So Jesus said to them,  
“Untie him and let him go.”  
Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary  
and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

## **PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS**

A few weeks ago, I was asked an honest question that very much deserves an honest answer. The question was simple enough. In fact, you may have asked this same question yourself in the past.

My friend asked me,

“Jim, what happens to us after we die?”

One would think that a priest (especially a “learned theologian” like myself) would have an answer to such a question – something simple and to-the-point; something tucked away in lecture notes long ago – maybe a clever soundbite, easily remembered and user friendly.

I hope you won’t be upset if I say that you should turn and walk quickly away from any priest who has a pat answer to this question.

I pray to God that, whenever I am asked this question, I have the grace to pause before opening my mouth in reply. A pause is necessary for two reasons. First, we should pause to honor the one asking the question. In my experience as a priest, seldom do people ask this question of me out of idle curiosity. Often this question comes out of a heart riddled by the dread of death that only human beings can know. The angels and the animals don’t know dread.

There is a second reason for pausing before answering this oh-so-simple question. I pause in order to remind myself that I don’t know very much about what happens to us when we die. You may be surprised to learn that Christianity says remarkably little about what will, without any doubt at all, happen to us all.

I’ve said more than once that faith requires us to trust in a Mystery that utterly exceeds our ability to understand. Sometimes this Mystery grasps us like a mother cat carrying her kitten to safety. Other times it seizes us like an eagle soaring into the heavens clutching its prey. We cannot fully understand what happens to us after we die and neither can we fully understand the Steadfast Love that has promised to lay hold of our souls after we are lowered into our grave.

We might not be able to understand what happens to us when we die, but I also think it important to remember that God has not left us speechless about death and its aftermath. He has given us stories to tell so that we might respond in depth to our dread of death.

Take, for example, today's Gospel. The raising of Lazarus is the last of the seven "signs" in John's Gospel. In calling out Lazarus from his tomb, Jesus holds up a "sign" (*icon*) within this world and placed it before us so that we might begin to imagine, with a heart touched by grace, what happens to us after we die.

This means that you should not take what I say about death literally. Don't take it literally. Take it seriously.

John's account is a brilliant piece of storytelling, but alas, I cannot comment on all the components that make up the narrative. Let me focus on just one element: the words Jesus utters at the grave of Lazarus, his friend who has died after what appears to be a sudden illness.

After learning that Lazarus was ill, and then waiting two days before setting off to Bethany, Jesus is greeted by Lazarus's two sisters with words that are obviously confrontational:

"Lord, if you had been here,  
my brother would not have died."

The sisters are surrounded by friends. All are weeping. Jesus becomes "deeply troubled." Then, moved by the deepest emotions, he said what any of us would say,

"Where have you laid him?"  
They said to him, "Sir, come and see."  
And Jesus wept.

"And Jesus wept..." – John is a great storyteller. He has captured the enormous depth of Jesus's humanity in four short syllables. Never, never forget that every revelation of Jesus's humanity is simultaneously a revelation of what God is like.

And Jesus wept.

I think this is what happens after we die. Jesus stands before the darkness of our tomb and weeps like he wept for Lazarus, his friend. Just like that day in Bethany so long ago, Jesus will be moved by the deepest emotions as he stands before our grave and he will weep.

But there's more. Jesus then says,

“Take away the stone.”

Martha, the dead man’s sister, is appalled,

“Lord, by now there will be a stench;  
he has been dead for four days.”

But Jesus will not be turned away from his purpose. He raises his eyes to heaven and prays to God as he stands before the darkness of his friend’s tomb.

I am thinking back over my life, trying to remember how many times I have stood with you as you gather to bury your loved ones. I have stood before a lot of graves over the years. How I wish I had the power to say what Jesus then said at Lazarus’s grave.

He cried out in a loud voice,  
“Lazarus, come out!”

Jesus stared into the darkness of his friend’s tomb and called out to him by name, saying, “come out.”

And I think this too is what will happen to us when we die.

After death comes to us, we will fall into the darkness of the tomb. This is a harsh and dreadful truth. Death is dreadful. Despair can take an infinite number of forms. To pretend that we don’t find death dreadful is just another form of despair. Our scriptures assure us that despair was never God’s plan for us. The dread of death has come to us through sin. It is our doing. It is not God’s mischief.

After death comes to us, we will fall into the darkness of the tomb. Then, suddenly, we will hear the voice of the Lord, calling out to us by name. Don’t ask me to explain why, but I can’t help but think that hearing the Lord’s voice will take us completely by surprise, no matter how fervent our faith was when we lived on this side of our grave. The Lord’s calling of our name will take us by surprise because it is a grace – in fact, it is the greatest of all graces, the most fundamental grace – and grace always takes us by surprise.

We will be taken by surprise, and yet we will immediately recognize this voice that calls out our name – it will sound like the voice of a dear and trusted friend. And when we hear our name called, just like Lazarus did in his tomb, the falling will stop.

And then the Lord will say to us what he said to Lazarus –

“come out!”

I confess that I am utterly fascinated by these words.

“Come out!” is what God said to Abraham when the story of our salvation began. “Come out!” God said to Abraham. Abandon all you have and come out with me into the desert. I will lead you to a promised land.

“Come out!” – these words mark the beginning of the great journey which is our faith. “Come out!” God said to Abraham, and “come out!” is what God commands of us to do as well.

In fact, it is the only thing he commands of us.

We are to “come out” of the futility of our old life and sojourn with the God of the Desert, like Abraham, the Father of Faith. We do this whenever we forgive those who trespass against us and when we make right what is wrong in this mean, competitive world that is so insanely addicted to brutality. We do this when we renounce violence in all its intoxicating forms and when we put aside judgment and self-righteousness and reach out in compassion to those who have been abandoned, to those who count for nothing. We have shut ourselves into tombs of our own making. And the only thing God ever says to us is some version of what Jesus said to Lazarus and what the God of the Desert said to Abraham: “come out!”

Do you see my point? We need to understand this correctly. Jesus called out to Lazarus, his friend, saying exactly what God said to Abraham at the very beginning of the journey of faith. This means that rising from the dead is like stepping out into the desert in an act of faith and trust in God. The resurrection of the body began with Abraham setting out into the desert with God’s promise.

Whenever any human being steps out in the desert in obedience to God, there is Jesus standing before our grave and calling us by name to “come out!”

I think this is what happens to us when we die: Like Lazarus, we will be taken by surprise to hear our name called in the familiar voice of a friend. We will be commanded to “Come out!”

And the Good News is that we can begin to imagine this harsh and dreadful Mystery because the resurrection of our bodies has already begun.

What happens to us when we die? To answer this question, we all must pause in a gesture of respect for our wounded humanity and also to admit how little we understand about ourselves and our predicament. And then we need to listen. The Lord is calling out our name.



### **PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA***

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* (“divine reading”). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?