

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Sunday, 27 March 2023

- 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
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: HOMILY ON THE READING

I have a lot in common with Lazarus. Actually, I suspect you do as well.

To explain what I mean, I need to take a little risk. A homily is not supposed to be about the preacher. It is supposed to be about you and how the scriptures illuminate your faith. But, I want to share something important about the raising of Lazarus and, to do this, I need to tell you something about me as well.

Lazarus and I have something important in common. Both of us have died and been returned to our lives in this world. We both know what it is like to descend into the darkness of a tomb and we both know what is like to be restored to our lives, our work, our family and our friends in the world that we share with one another.

Lazarus, at the end of John’s story, is a resuscitated corpse. In a sense, I can say the same thing about myself.

I don’t mean to suggest that I died physically, as Lazarus did. All the same, I think I know what it is like to dwell in the darkness of a tomb for four long days.

Almost twenty-five years ago, a colleague at my university told me that I was limping as we walked back to our offices across campus after teaching our classes. My right leg was beginning to buckle from under me as well. Things grew worse over time. Friends urged me to talk to doctors. The physicians in orthopedics at UCLA did elaborate tests and

then said, "that's odd." Eventually they said, "you need to talk to someone in neurology."

I said to them, "Tell the truth: you think I have multiple sclerosis." (My sister was diagnosed with MS decades before this). They said, "go to neurology."

Neurology looked at the "foci" on the MRI ("with and without stain") and then ordered a "lumbar puncture" (it was awful). Then neurology sat me down and confirmed what I had suspected all along.

I had multiple sclerosis.

In the weeks that followed, I continued to teach my classes and write papers for publication. I counseled students and attended faculty meetings and helped in my parish on weekends.

I functioned quite well... but I had fallen into a tomb: I was depressed.

My depression was not "clinical" - I continued to meet my many responsibilities as a priest and as a professor. But depression had grabbed ahold of me, even though I tried to pretend otherwise.

Two months or so after the diagnosis, one of my doctors said, "you're depressed, and you need to do something about it."

I found a psychotherapist. She was extraordinarily skillful in accompanying me during my sojourn in the tomb.

Depression is like the flu. It's a biological condition: your body is incubating a virus. Something similar is true of depression. It's a biological condition, only the treatment is not plenty of liquids and an anti-viral. The treatment is looking deeply into yourself. I had to explore my fear and my anger. I had to admit to myself how my life was going to change as a result of my illness and also to affirm what I knew to be good and even heroic about myself.

I think it is important to say that the grace of God works to heal our souls when we talk about the darkness within us accompanied by a skillful psychotherapist. The same is true when we bear our souls to a skillful spiritual director (although they are not the same).

Can you see why I feel so close to Lazarus? We have something important in common. Both of us have fallen into a tomb. Both of us have died and, somehow, returned to our previous lives in the world.

Lazarus, at the end of John's great story, is a resuscitated corpse. In a sense, I can say the same thing about myself.

After about eighteen months of psychotherapy, I had emerged from my tomb into the light of this world with an important realization: I could feel in my bones that the Holy Spirit was promising me the grace to continue my life and my service as a man of faith.

I know this might sound a little pious or even pompous. But I really have no other way of saying what had happened to me.

Or perhaps I could say what John says in his story:

When Jesus saw her [Martha] 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...

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 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."

Like Lazarus, I heard the voice of the Redeemer and came out of my tomb.

I am fascinated with the fact that, in telling the story of Lazarus, John informs us that Lazarus was in the tomb for "four days." In fact, he mentions this detail twice in his story. It's as if he wants to emphasize that Jesus lay in the tomb for three days while Lazarus lay in the tomb for four days.

John is telling us that the raising of Lazarus is NOT like the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was raised up by the power of the Spirit into a New Life. Lazarus, in contrast, was returned to his old life in Bethany, with his sisters Martha and Mary.

Lazarus is a resuscitated corpse. And as such, Lazarus now awaits another tomb, another darkness and another chance to hear the voice of the Redeemer calling out to him,

"Lazarus come out."

But Lazarus' second rising from the tomb will not be like his first. In the Life of the World to Come, Lazarus will not be a resuscitated corpse. He will have a fully resurrected body which is the body of the Resurrected Christ himself.

Some of you, I suppose, are thinking: Father Fredericks doesn't know what he's talking about (once again). You are correct. I don't know what I am talking about. No one knows what the Resurrection of the Body and the Life of the World to Come will be like.

So, for now, more modestly, let me just say that I have something in common with Lazarus, the friend of Jesus. Both of us have died and have been returned to our old life in this world. We both know what it is like to have laid in the darkness of a tomb and we both know what it is like to be restored to our lives, our work, our family and our friends in the world.

And to this, let me add, both Lazarus and I know what it is to live an old life in which we await a second death and a second tomb. We both know what it is to long to hear for a second time the voice of the Savior calling out to us by name as we dwell in the darkness of the tomb.

Lazarus and I both know what it is to live in this world as a resuscitated corpse. We both know that the meaning of our old life in this world has forever been transformed by the grace of God. Our old loves and old commitments, our work in this world and our service to those around us have been transformed. The old life now has been reoriented toward another death and a New Life that has yet to come.

This is a very personal story I am telling you today. And yet, I am confident that many of you have similar stories to tell. I think all of us have descended into one sort of tomb or another. I think all of us, if we look inside ourselves, will see that we have something in common with Lazarus. We know what it is like to descend into the darkness of despair and, after four long, lonely days, be restored to our old lives in this world.

Now, like Lazarus, let us pray together that the Holy Spirit grant us the grace to see that this old life is but an anticipation of a New Life to come.

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?