

Readings and reflection for Sunday 29th March Passion Sunday

I've included all the readings for today, including the Psalm. They all have something to say to us.

The Collect

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

First Reading Ezekiel 37.1-14

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' ⁴Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice; ♦
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss, ♦
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 But there is forgiveness with you, ♦
so that you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; ♦
in his word is my hope.

5 My soul waits for the Lord,
more than the night watch for the morning, ♦
more than the night watch for the morning.

6 O Israel, wait for the Lord, ♦
for with the Lord there is mercy;

7 With him is plenteous redemption ♦
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Second Reading Romans 8.6-11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.

Gospel Reading John 11.1-45

¹A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection

This Sunday is Passion Sunday, the day when we start to turn from the wilderness of Lent towards the events of Holy Week. And in today's Gospel we are given a foretaste, a dress rehearsal in the story of the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were close friends of Jesus. Their home was a place of solace for him, a retreat from the crowds during his public ministry. So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill it would have been natural for him to want to rush to his bedside. To offer his support. This is what we would want to do for someone we love. But Jesus doesn't do that. He has to overcome his natural human instincts for a greater purpose. And he delays going to them. At this time of crisis and anxiety, our natural human instinct is to be with those we love. But for the greater good we have to remain in isolation. This situation gives a whole new meaning to our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. He tells us that to set the mind on the flesh is death. To see people in the flesh which is our normal human instinct, puts our flesh and the flesh of others in danger. But to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. We are still one in the Spirit. Even though we are physically separated, we are still joined together as members of God's family. And thank goodness we have the benefits of modern technology like telephones and computers which enable us to keep in touch.

Eventually, Jesus judges that the time is right for him to go to Bethany in Judea. But Judea has become a place of danger for him. His disciples warn him that he is at risk of being stoned. While many of us are able to isolate ourselves, we are very aware of all those who have to go into situations of danger at the moment. Especially those on the front line of our health service. We give thanks for their courage and pray for their safety.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, he is greeted by Martha. She is full of regret, and perhaps anger, that Jesus had not come sooner. Martha knows that Jesus could bring Lazarus back to life. God will give him whatever he asks. And on this occasion, Jesus promises that her brother will rise again. But Martha thinks he is talking about the resurrection at the end of time. This is standard Jewish teaching. Martha's rather flat response shows that at the moment this isn't very comforting. And I know that there will be people like Martha who have lost loved ones recently who are not yet ready to hear those words of hope. But then Jesus then utters those words which are so central to our faith. I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Words that are read at the beginning of funerals. Though their reality can seem far off, in the midst of our

grief and loss, Jesus is there, alive. And like Martha we have to hang on to those words, waiting for when they become real to us again.

Martha, you will remember, was the busy sister. She went to meet Jesus on the road. Mary was the more reflective of the two. The one who wanted to spend time with Jesus. In this time of crisis we need Marthas and Marys. Those who get on and do and organise. And those who reflect and pray and think. When Mary heard that Jesus was calling for her she went to him and knelt at his feet. Not surprisingly, she too was upset and angry with Jesus. 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Where were you? Why did you let this happen? In times of crisis like this one it is entirely natural for us to ask God some hard questions. It's ok for us to get angry with him. He is big enough to cope. By being honest with him about our feelings we can find a deeper relationship with him.

Jesus is not unfeeling. Far from it. He weeps. This is not just evidence that he was really human but that he was the Word made flesh. In him, God shares in our suffering. He is not remote or absent but stands alongside us and he weeps. He weeps for Lazarus his friend. For Mary and Martha in their grief. For griefs past and also for himself as he journeys towards the cross. However strong our faith we all need to grieve. We cannot skip Good Friday and go straight to Easter Sunday.

Jesus asks, 'Where have you laid him?' Two weeks later, on Easter Sunday, Mary, supposing him to be the gardener, will say, 'They have taken my master away and I do not know where they have laid him.' There are already signs of future resurrection in the present. Like Jesus, Lazarus was buried in a cave tomb, with a stone to seal it. And through the power of God, Lazarus is raised from the dead. It's a powerful moment that will stay with all those who witnessed it. And when Easter does eventually happen it will help people to come to terms with Jesus' own resurrection. As we go through the coming weeks, we need to be alive to the small resurrections around us so that when the world finally does come alive again, we will be ready and able to recognise and celebrate it. Amen.