

## THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT - A

In today's gospel reading we have the last of the readings from John's gospel the raising of Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus showing his power over life and death which leads many to believe but the Jewish authorities 'from that day were determined to kill him.' In the first reading the prophet Ezekiel gives us a picture of the symbolic messianic restoration of Israel after the sufferings of the exile. In the second reading Paul teaches that the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Ezekiel, one of the major prophets of Israel. Ezekiel's whole ministry, it is thought, was among the exiles in Babylon. The Exile lasted from 587 to 538 B.C. Called by God to maintain the faith of the Israelites during this traumatic period of Jewish history, Ezekiel's entire teaching centres on inner conversion: we must achieve a new heart and a new spirit, see Ezk.36.26. The Temple was his ruling interest and he holds the Law in veneration. Ezekiel is primarily a visionary, his four visions occupy a substantial part of the book. The Messiah is not to be a king but a shepherd who will look for individual rather than collective reparation. The book is divided into four parts: 1.Threats and reproaches addressed to the Israelites. 2.Proclamations against the nations. 3.Comfort during and after the siege of Jerusalem. 4.Provisions for a new political and religious constitution after the Exile.

The reading 37.12-14 is taken from a vision that the prophet had, he has been taken by God who sets him 'down in the middle of the valley, a valley full of bones,' presumably the bones of those who had died in battle before the destruction of Jerusalem. God means to gather up these bones and re-cloth them with flesh and breath new life into them. This represents the messianic restoration of Israel after the sufferings of the Exile. Today's reading is a message of hope for the exiles. God can breath new into a nation, as of course did happen after 538 when the exiles were allowed to return to rebuild their homes and the Temple the centre of their life. To have a fuller understanding of the reading read the first fourteen verses of the chapter.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 129, is a penitential psalm but yet a psalm of hope, it expresses trust in God the Redeemer. We can count on the word of the Lord 'because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption', and this is Old Testament prayer!

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure salvation. Paul maintained this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus.

In the reading, 8.8-11, Paul is speaking of the Christian's spiritual life. He has already spoken about our deliverance from sin and death and the Law and now he comes on to the life of the spirit. Read, if you have time, from the beginning of chapter 8 down to verse 17. In this section Paul is teaching that those who are in Christ Jesus are free from the effects of sin and death because we have received the spirit of life. God has dealt with sin by sending his Son with a physical body 'and in that body God condemned sin', so we must behave 'as the spirit dictates.' We have become spiritual beings and must be 'interested in spiritual things'. To limit ourselves to un-spiritual things is to be at enmity with God and that means death, now our reading takes up. Paul repeats what he has just said confirming that the un-spiritual is not pleasing to God and that we must lead spiritual lives because the Spirit of God has made his home in everyone of us. Our bodies are doomed to physical death and are the instrument of spiritual death but the Spirit is alive a power for resurrection within us because we have been justified 'and if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you' then we can be sure that our mortal bodies will be given life 'through his Spirit living in you.' Again Paul's utter conviction of faith is an encouragement to us and is confirmed by the gospel reading.