

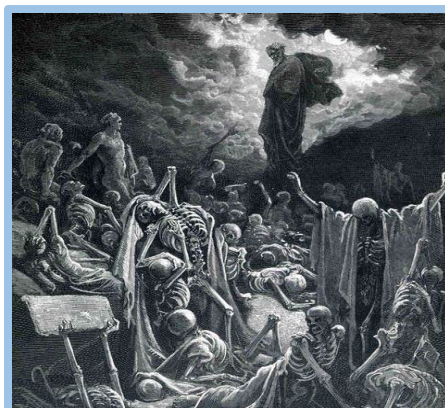
REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT ~ 26 March 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today's readings in the Liturgy of the Word are well-known to all of us, so well known that we sometimes take them for granted. The readings from Ezekiel (the dry bones – remember the folk song, "Dem Dry Bones"), Psalm 130 (written to music by many famous musicians often with its Latin title, "De Profundis"), and the Gospel of John (raising of Lazarus from the dead) are known even in popular culture.

Let us reflect on three dimensions of the readings that may have new or enhanced meaning in the times in which we live: (i) the sense of spirit and body, (ii) the relationship between the person and the community, and (iii) the relationship between the person/community and God.

The sense of spirit and body – for many centuries now, Christians have interpreted the body and soul or body and spirit through the lens of dualism. In the times of the people of Israel and the people of Judea, that dualism was not part of their perspective or worldview. The Hebrew word *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ) means a "living being" without distinction of body and soul. When the person dies, the whole person dies. God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel saying, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil" (Ezek 37:14). The persons have died and are in their graves. Now God's spirit returns to them, and they live on Earth again, "your own soil."



The vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Gustave Dore

Psalm 130 has the same understanding – there is no distinction between body and soul, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in the Lord's word I hope" (Ps 130:5). With this understanding, Paul's words in the reading from Romans make more sense, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Rom 8:9). Each one of us is a whole person, body and soul and spirit – all one. The last words of the 4th century Nicene Creed ("I look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come") and the 5th century Apostles Creed ("I believe. . . in the resurrection of the body") echo this same understanding. The pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, in his prayer-poem speaks to this integrity of being so beautifully:

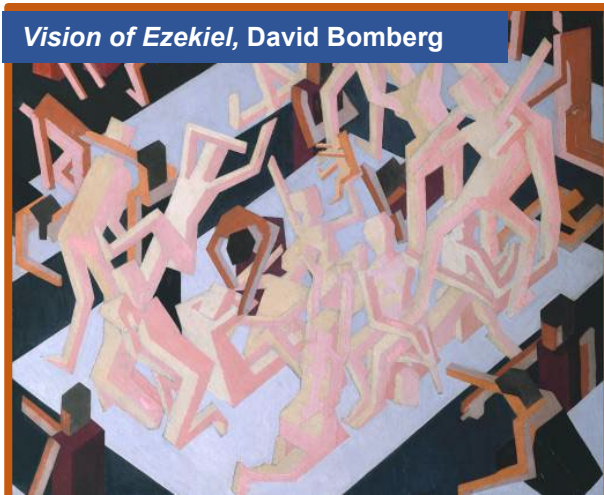
The flesh is not bad, of course:
it's how the Spirit sings.
It's only bad when we forget the singing,
when we think flesh is all we are:
a separate little sack of self
(whose selfishness is bound to get reckless).
In truth, we are all one splendid body,
visible in many bodies,
alive in one Spirit,
all of us fingers of one hand,
complete in each other.
We are both the body and its belonging.
You are the necessary syllable
of the infinite song,

the flute and the music.
Dust and wind, breath and bone.
It happens in the singing.
Alone, your single note is merely noise,
your body merely flesh.
But in the harmony of the whole great chorus
the note of love you offer with your body
is beautiful and becomes more than you.
You love your neighbor as your flesh
and are made whole, and more than flesh.

The newness of our time is the recognition that the sacred communion of all creation includes all beings, not just humans but other-than-humans. We believe that God's first incarnation is not in human form but in the form of the cosmos, the whole universe. The 12th century Muslim leader, Ibn al- Arabī, reminded us, "God has mercified the universe into being." Every Advent in our Cosmic Advent Wreath prayer, we repeat the words of Richard Rohr, "God's first 'idea' was to become manifest – to pour out divine, infinite love into finite visible forms. The "First Flaring Forth" (Big Bang) is now our scientific name for that first idea; and 'Christ' is our theological name. Both are about LOVE and BEAUTY exploding outward in all directions." God's Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos and, with God's word, creation unfolds. Body, spirit, and mind are one – one in the human person, one in the cosmos, one in the sacred communion of all creation.

The relationship between the person and the community – in earlier times, the community was the most important entity in any society. God punishes the people for turning to other gods despite the covenant that God has made with the people. In our story from Ezekiel, the dry bones of the people are given new life, "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people" (Ezek 37:13). Ezekiel and Jeremiah are the first prophets who begin to speak about the individual's responsibility for their own actions. From that time, we have gradually moved to being more person-entered in all aspects of our society, but, when we have taken this to extremes, individualism takes priority over the common good. Indigenous communities have retained the importance of the collective, the community, in everything from raising children to making decisions about work and the environment.

Vision of Ezekiel, David Bomberg



In our time, we have begun to find the balance once again – we speak about justice but also about social justice, about ethics **and** social or communal ethics, about personal **and** communal contemplation. Our awareness includes the person **and** the community **and now** the interconnectedness of all Earth – the personal, the communal, and the global. In the 1960s, the Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, introduced us to the term, "the global village." We see this interconnectedness mirrored in the words given us by the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, and repeated by Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si'*, "The cry of

The icon near the entrance to the church of St. Lazarus, Larnaca, Cyprus

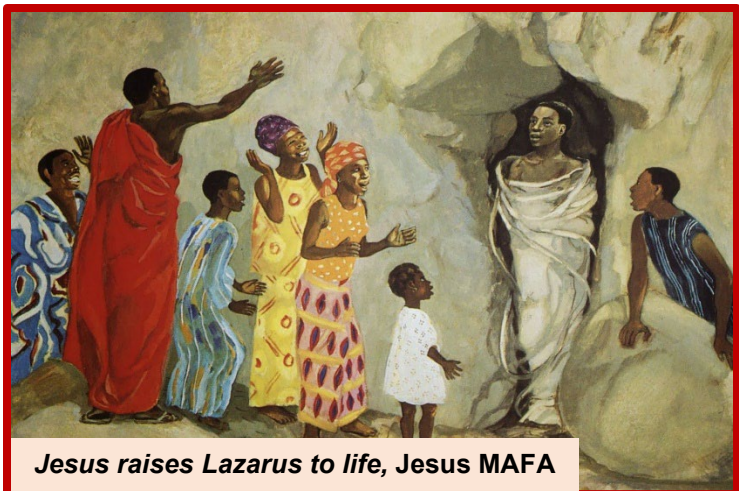


Earth and the cry of the poor are one.” In 2020, we certainly saw the intertwining of the personal, the communal, and the global in a new light with the COVID pandemic.

Our readings today hold that balance. The story from Ezekiel has God “open the graves” and bring the “people” back to life and to their own soil. Psalm 130 begins with the psalmist proclaiming a lament in the first person, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord” and ends with Israel’s thanksgiving and trust, “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with the Lord is great power to redeem. It is the Lord who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” (Ps 130:7-8). The narrative in John 11 focuses on the man Lazarus, on his family, and on his community. Jesus not only raises Lazarus from the dead but tells the whole community through Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (Jn 11:25).

When Pope Francis included Martha, Mary, and Lazarus as saints in the General Roman Calendar, he did so because of “the important evangelical witness they offered in welcoming the Lord Jesus into their home, in listening to him attentively, in believing that he is the resurrection and the life.” In 2021, he set July 29 as the feast day for these three siblings.

The relationship between the person/community and God – there are many diverse images of God in the Old and New Testaments and, without doubt, in our own relationships with God at different times in our lives. What is astounding about today’s readings is the image of intimacy in the relationship between God and the person and between God and the community. God speaks through Ezekiel, “I will open your graves. . . I will bring you back to the land of Israel. . . I will put my spirit within you. . . you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.” This is a personal, an intimate connection between God and the people whom God has chosen. The psalmist cries out, “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (Ps 130:3-4). This is a direct plea from the one who trusts completely that God will listen and respond. Paul can also say with confidence, “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. But if Christ is in you” (Rom 8:9-10). Not only will God listen to our cries, but God dwells within us, the Spirit of God



dwells within us, Christ dwells within us – words repeated in this short passage from the letter to the Romans.

In the story from John, we need only to read one short verse to feel deep in our hearts the intimacy of our relationship, “Jesus began to weep” (Jn 11:35). Martha and Mary know this when they send for Jesus, “the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill’” (Jn 11:3). The narrator tells us in verse 5, “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” Martha trusts Jesus enough to rebuke him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21) and then to engage in a deep theological conversation with him, leading him to an increased awareness of his own vocation, “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25).

Mary also trusts their relationship enough to give him the same rebuke that her sister had, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:32). And the narrator notes that, when Jesus saw Mary weeping, “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (Jn 11:33). And Jesus’ close relationship with his Father is also intimately described by Jesus himself, “‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me’” (Jn 11:41-42). This longest narrative in the Gospels outside the passion story is emotional, intimate, and relational – among friends, within family, among neighbours, between the people and God.

Yet again the words of Steve Garnaas-Holmes hold the beauty of these relationships embedded in our story:

For Lazarus, for Mary and Martha,
for Jerusalem, for us – Jesus weeps,
and invites us into the spiritual discipline of weeping:
to cede control, to be, after all, a body, baby-weak,
subject to the sting of love,
the pangs of our connectedness.
The rend in the fabric of Oneness
is made real in the rend in your eyes,
the crack in the wall, the opening of your flesh.
You surrender to a current,
like a river pulled into the ocean,
deep within you, flowing out, a holy out-flowing.
Tears come when you have gone beyond yourself,
embodying a divine bond, severed yet still holding.
Weep; for even if you have not suffered
you have loved a suffering world.
Break the seal. Feel the aliveness of a good cry.
For if you can weep you can hope.
If you can weep you have loved,
and will love again.
You flow with God, who weeps for us in grief,
and weeps with joy.



The Resurrection Of Lazarus
Henry Ossawa Tanner

The closing words of this poem speak to all four of our readings today, “For if you can weep you can hope. If you can weep you have loved, and will love again. You flow with God, who weeps for us in grief, and weeps with joy.” May this Lent be for us a time to weep and a time to love, a time to lament and a time to rejoice!