

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A

First Reading

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon 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.”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:6–11

For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact 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, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 11:1–45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 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 from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and

believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying 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 also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I'm having a hard time writing about this vision of Ezekiel's, my eyes blurred with tears. It rips at my heart, the ache to see God raise up dry bones and make of them a people. I'm going to risk making some of my readers angry, but when I look out on the Church today, I see mostly dry bones. Not bad people, just an organization that doesn't know how to lift people out of their graves and set them on their feet and give to them a land of promise. The leadership in the Church is doing its very best to make life in the grave tolerable, but we still live as if we were yet to be raised from the dead when the power

that raised Jesus from the grave is already at work in and for us. (Ephesians 1:19-20) This sounds harsh, even in my own re-reading, but I don't mean it to be. It is just an assessment. The church, as it stands now, lacks the power, the means to effect meaningful change. Clergy of all stripes struggle mightily to sustain their flocks against the ravages of a hostile world, and because we have been for generations, for centuries, living without that power, these noble men and women aren't even able to dream of a day when their congregants really soar. (Sometimes I think they do, but the ones who dare seem to be the ones who become the most disillusioned.)

Too many eyes are fixed on what's wrong in our world, the climate, cultural evils, the poisoning of the planet, the decay of any social fabric, locally and/or internationally. We strive to overcome these things without first having our bones clothed with sinews and skin. It doesn't matter which end of the political/social spectrum on which we find ourselves. We are vessels of the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, and we can raise dead souls to new life (even literally!). Those who live in the power of that life don't act from the fear that drives division. They don't live in the fear that causes us to hoard resources or expend them in excess.

And a people made whole, living from their positions *in Christ*, who is seated in the heavenlies, this people doesn't struggle upward from below against the problems as if they are something to break through, they act from the victory that is already theirs. And a resurrection people, moving from their place of victory, seated with Jesus in the heavenlies, will do amazing things. Isaiah saw it.

“Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;” (Isaiah 35:6)

Even the wilderness that we have created with our wasteful use of God's Creation can and will be healed.

When. Not if. *When* God raises up the dry bones of His people and sets us on our feet and we begin to walk and speak and move as resurrection people.

I believe that God has started this work, but much of the revival that God began in the early years of the 20th century has become bogged down in politics and self-preservation, enslaved by wrath and fear. This part of the church is becoming just as dry and dead as the established churches against which they rail. They're louder, but the “gospel” they offer has no more power to raise dry bones.

What is needed is a revival of joy. The joy that comes with discovering our real identities, restored to us in the Cross. Joy will empower change that doesn't threaten to

burn out its carriers. Joy will draw those who have been otherwise turned off to Jesus by our anger or our rhetoric or our complacency. Joy will free us to see how God is working in ways we wouldn't have expected and rejoice in them rather than try to force them to conform to our own visions.

I'm sorry I got so preachy on this Divergence. This is been on my heart for years and sometimes the fire just won't stay shut up in my bones.

Second Reading

When I read anything from Romans, I try to remember that it was an occasional letter. Paul wasn't writing a Gospel or anything he intended to be read by the whole church. He wrote to a particular congregation for a specific reason, on a specific occasion. To read Paul without having some sense of the situation that prompted his letter is to set it free from its moorings and make it too easy to read into it meanings that aren't there.

Romans is probably the letter of Paul's that is most often read without context. I have heard it called Paul's "systematic theology." While it does cover many of the themes that we find in his other letters, that wasn't his purpose, and so to read it that way robs it of its context, and therefore its meaning.

The context for the letter to the Romans, the situation in Rome that prompted the letter, is a matter of continuing discussion among scholars. Sometimes um, "lively" discussion. They aren't always kind to one another in their disagreements. Much of the disagreement in the last couple of decades seems to be about how intentionally "anti-imperial" Paul is in his letter. There is no question that Paul adopts and redefines several terms that were a part of imperial Rome's propaganda, peace, law, even righteousness, things that Roman rule promised to bring. The question seems to be whether or not Paul used these terms the way he did because they were a part of current parlance, or because he was also arguing specifically *against* an imperial mindset.

I tend to lean toward the group that believes that Paul is intentionally subverting imperial terms, especially in his letter to Rome. This is because of the tension in the Roman congregation that prompted the letter in the first place, between factions in the congregation, one Roman/Gentile, the other Jewish or Jewish Christian. With Mark Nanos (I've mentioned him before in other Divergences) I prefer to view the Jewish group in Rome as truly Jewish, not Jewish Christian (yet?), but I don't assign as much importance to that distinction as I once did.

When scholars argue against the "anti-imperial" Paul, the part of Romans they most often point to as a huge stumbling block for that argument is Romans 13:1-7. It is indeed

difficult to understand how Paul could be anti-empire given those verses. But this is one of those times that Nanos' insights into Romans becomes more important. First, let me quote for you those verses from Romans, in case you aren't carrying them around in your head. (Doesn't everyone?)

Romans 13:1–7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. (ESV)

You can see why many scholars refuse to accept that Paul was against the empire. Except that Mark Nanos has argued convincingly that the Jewish portion of the Roman congregation (at least much of it) was truly Jewish, not Christian, and that Paul is here exhorting the Roman/Gentile portion of the congregation to be obedient to the *synagogue authorities* under whose auspices they worship. (As no religious assembly in the empire was permitted unless it was part of the emperor cult, with one exception. Jews were permitted to assemble, and so Christians were also, within the synagogue system.) Even the taxes that are mentioned fit within Nanos' framework, as a tax for the Temple was regularly collected to be sent to Jerusalem until the Temple's destruction, some 15 years or so after Romans was written.

I'm already much too sidetracked by this larger discussion of Romans, but I think it's important to set this week's reading in a context that will make better sense of it for us in our time. I'll probably discuss Romans (in general) more as other readings come along in the lectionary.

So, for this reading, how does this understanding of the tension between Jew and Gentile, church and empire, inform our understanding?

Our reading seems most focused on the contrast between flesh and spirit, death versus life and peace. (Keep in mind the way that "peace" resonates with Romans whose empire promised the "Pax Romana.") The flesh (Rome) is utterly incapable of being obedient to

God's law. It simply cannot please God. The Spirit brings life (and peace) that the flesh (Rome) cannot bring.

Yes, all this resonates with Paul's arguments about justification through faith, not the law, but the terms he uses are somewhat different and the setting is very different. It sounds a little like Galatians, but if you read Romans carefully you'll see that the arguments are different, and in the case of Romans, deeply colored by the congregation's location in the heart of the empire.

Paul doesn't set Christianity *within* the context of empire. He sets it over against empire. How might that shape our thoughts about the relationship between the church and any government?

Gospel Text

"Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

In other words, "I could have gone sooner, and he wouldn't have died, but then your belief, your faith would not have benefited as it will now. Let's go."

I just have to love Thomas' response. "Well, guys, if Jesus is going to die, let's go die with Him."

But I don't want to get distracted by Thomas. We'll get back to him on 2 Easter. Today is about timing. God's timing. About how God sometimes delays so that we can see something about Him, about who He wants to be to us, that we won't see if He intervenes sooner.

This is a ticklish sort of balance beam to walk. It can lead to some bad theology, like "God wants me to suffer this so He can be better glorified." It can lead to some passivity that God doesn't want, too, passivity that sounds like, "I just have to endure this until God shows up. If I try to do anything I'll block the blessing He has in store for me." There may be times when that's true, but I don't believe that's to be our default response. It was not Mary's or Martha's. They sent word to Jesus in time for Jesus to save their brother, and Jesus doesn't castigate them for acting to prevent Lazarus' death. Neither does He criticize them for saying that He could have saved their brother if He'd just come sooner.

I mentioned in a previous Divergence about Graham Cooke's teaching on the value of rest. What he teaches is the kind of balance that I'm trying to get at here. "Rest" isn't

passivity. It's action without worry, acting in confidence that protects us from anger and frustration. "Resting" in the knowledge of who we are, how precious we are to the Father.

Here's something I learned while I was studying this lesson from John 11 this week. God's delay for our sake costs Him. It cost Jesus.

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany and meets Mary at the grave site, we read, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." If you read the little footnotes in your Bibles, some of them will have a note next to "deeply moved" and when you look at the foot of the page it might say, "Or indignant." That's because the the word translated as "deeply moved" is *embrimesato*, (from *embrimaomai*) which is translated as "sternly ordered" or "spoke sternly to" in every other instance in the New Testament where it pops up. It's stern. It's not compassionate. It's a hard word. Our translators, in their desire to save us any consternation over the image of Jesus that might have conveyed, have translated it, "deeply moved."

And here's the thing. It isn't in the passive voice. It's in active voice. That means this isn't a feeling that Jesus had come upon him (passive), it's something He *did*. And more than that, it's also in the "middle indicative" voice. Middle voice in Greek is peculiar, and I won't pretend to understand it completely, but basically when you do something in "middle voice" in Greek, what you do concerns yourself in some way, not someone or something else. When Jesus "spoke sternly" in the middle voice, He spoke to Himself. Or maybe to Himself about Himself.

So if I were to translate that sentence more literally (and accurately) it would come out something like, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he *spoke sternly to Himself...*" and then if we want to go on being accurate, "*and greatly troubled Himself.*" Because that's what it says. He was not troubled by what he saw. That would be in the passive voice. (Being troubled passively, in passive voice happens elsewhere in the NT.) It's in the active voice, and the word "himself" is in the Greek, they just left it out. I can't figure out why. Jesus spoke sternly to Himself. He greatly troubled Himself.

When Jesus weeps, the people around Him are confused. They think He's weeping because of the death of His beloved friend. But that isn't what the text says. It says He weeps after seeing the grief of those who loved Lazarus. He speaks sternly to Himself, He greatly troubles Himself for their tears. He knows He's the cause of their pain. He knows why He did it, but He doesn't just glide in knowing the surprise He has in store. What they suffer causes Him to trouble Himself. So much so that He weeps.

It is as though He heard the words of Lazarus' two sisters, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died," and turns them on Himself. "You really could have prevented all these tears."

That is the God we worship. The God who loves us too much not to allow us to pass through grief to gain greater joy, but also loves us too much not to take responsibility for the pain He allows and greatly troubles Himself over it, to the point of weeping.

Frankly, this is a whole new way of understanding God's relationship to the pain in the world for me. Maybe you have understood this from the beginning, but I missed it. I might have told you that I know God shares our pain, my pain, when the brokenness of the world brings me to tears. I would have acknowledged that God allows that pain, but I never before understood that God pierces His own heart with my pain, actively takes responsibility for it and troubles Himself over it.

It's hard to fathom, to be honest. I can't quite get my head around it yet. It's kind of terrifying. But that's what the Bible says. No wonder our translators took the easy way out and mistranslated it.