

LITURGY NOTES

Lent 2023

In This Issue

In issue of *Liturgy Notes* we cover the readings and music suggestions for the season of Lent, through to Passion (Palm) Sunday. There are notes on the baptismal meaning of Lent, scrutinies and dismissals, and the use of ashes and palms.

Reclaiming Our Baptismal Identity

Each year, Lent returns and offers us the opportunity to reflect on our sinfulness, our need for conversion, and the generosity of God's grace and mercy. Catholics traditionally, even instinctively, embrace the penitential nature of the season and undertake prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in search of a change of heart, so that they may celebrate Easter with renewed vigour.

This tradition of penitential and ascetic practices in Lent comes from the broader application to the entire community of the practices of the order of penitents, the public form of the sacrament of reconciliation in the early Church. But even that origin has deeper origins still.

In the early Church, the order of penitents emerged as a ritualization of repentance for very serious post-baptismal sin. Penitents were temporarily excluded from sharing in the Eucharist, until they went through this process and were re-admitted to the table. They were, in effect, taking time away from the banquet until they could renew their status as the baptized and participate in it again.

So it only made sense that the rituals that accompanied penance would come from somewhere else: the catechumenate. As penitents wrestled with sin and conversion, and prepared themselves to rejoin the community of the baptized, they did so in the same way that those preparing for baptism did: prayer, fasting, sackcloth and ashes, kneeling and prostration, etc. *All* of these penitential practices had their deepest roots in the catechumenate.

This shines an important light on the meaning of all of our self-renunciation, preaching and praying about sin and forgiveness in this season. The RCIA is not a distraction, however edifying, from the main business of Lent. Preparation for baptism is the main business of Lent, the very original purpose Lent even exists. When we, the already-baptized, enter into this season, in all of the ways we do so, we're joining and supporting those preparing for baptism at Easter by preparing to renew our own baptismal promises at Easter as well. The whole season is aimed toward the profession of faith and the water (in the font or in the sprinkling) that comes when Easter does.

Ashes

“You’ve got dirt on your forehead.”

We’re likely to hear those words from thoughtful friends who display their intimate concern as well as their religious absentmindedness when we go out in public after Mass on Ash Wednesday.

The Distribution of Ashes after the homily replaces the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass. Instead of merely “calling to mind our sins,” we receive a very public reminder of our sinfulness.

We hear: “Repent and believe in the Gospel,” or, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

But it wasn’t always that way. In the early Church, only public sinners wore ashes. These sinners convened regularly to prepare for their reconciliation at a parish service and they formed—well, what we now call “support groups.” As penitents, they used to wear ashes on their heads or in their clothes. Symbols of human mortality, ashes represented their complete dependence on the mercy of God. In the Middle Ages, the support groups dwindled, but sinners remained strong in numbers. So Pope Urban II ordered up the first Ash Wednesday in 1091. Ashes were for everybody, and we’ve been rubbing dirt on our foreheads ever since.

Dirt is something we’re constantly washing off children and ourselves. Only in church do we deliberately put dirt on the most public part of our bodies, our foreheads.

Ashes are what’s left in the now-cold fireplace. Ashes heat the barbecue. Ashes are all that remains of the home after the tragic fire. Ashes enrich the compost heap. Ashes of the faithful departed fill commemorative urns. Ashes represent destruction, refuse, and waste, but they hint at new life.

Long before recycling became popular, the church got into the act on Ash Wednesday. Ever wonder what happens to those Palm Branches left over from last Holy Week? They’ve been burned into ash, stuffed into bags and now await the chance to dirty your forehead on Ash Wednesday this year. The symbol of Christ’s glory has become the symbol of our sin.

On Ash Wednesday, you’re not just another dirty face. No, you’ve tossed yourself into the recycling bin of Lent, ready for renewal this Easter.

Paul Turner

February 22, 2023 Ash Wednesday

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: Joel 2:12–18

The Book of Joel is attributed to Joel son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1) and likely dates to the Persian Period in Judah (539–333 BC). This was a time of uncertainty in Judah. On the one hand, the people were no longer captives in Babylon, but

on the other hand, Persian administration held control over the former kingdom of Judah. It was now a province of Persian territory, known as Yehud. While the Persians permitted the Judeans to rebuild and worship in the Temple, they also had a system of taxation that demanded payment in coinage, rather than in goods. It meant that people were impoverished as they sold off items, land, and even family members into slavery, in order to pay taxes to the Persian empire. The result was an enormous amount of suffering that

disproportionately affected the poorest classes. The most egregious sins were committed by those who exploited the suffering of others for their own gain. Some of this civil unrest can be detected in Joel 1.

Nevertheless, Joel anticipates that the “Day of the Lord” would soon come (Joel 1:15; 2:1), and it would inaugurate a time of plenty (Joel 2:19). To prepare for this day, Joel declares that the people should “return” to God with “all your heart” (Joel 2:12). The word “return” translates the Hebrew term “shuv,” a term that conveys the sense of a complete turning or reorientation. The people are instructed to effect this “return” through rituals: fasting, weeping, mourning, and gathering in solemn assembly to be sanctified. Notice that these preparations are to be done by the individual as a community member. As each person’s heart returns to God, the whole community is transformed.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is one of the seven penitential psalms (the others are Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). The superscription associates the psalm with David’s transgression against Bathsheba and her husband. This connects the psalm to a very personal and clear moment of wrong-doing, and makes the psalm’s confession of sin searing and heartfelt. It is a good psalm to pray as preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian community was written in the mid-50s AD, and it addresses a variety of concerns regarding Paul’s authority and the gospel message. The Corinthian community was likely largely gentile in origin, and so Paul is at pains to explain to them why it is important to avoid sin and be reconciled to God. Jewish believers in Jesus as Messiah would already have a relationship with God, but for gentile converts, this was new. What does Paul mean when he says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin” (5:21)? In the Bible, sin (or “missing the mark”) is frequently associated

with death (see Deut 30:15–20). Although Jesus was completely conformed to the will of God, he experienced death. However, this death was not the result or outcome of sin, but rather a means of sharing fully in human experience and pushing human experience into something new: the resurrection.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

In its context in the Gospel of Matthew, this reading is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which we’ve been hearing for the past several weeks. It follows the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1–11) and six re-articulations of Old Testament teachings, each beginning with “You have heard that it was said....but I say to you...” (Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Jesus summarizes these re-teachings with “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48), and the lection for today begins in the next verse.

The instruction to “be perfect” perhaps helps us hear and interpret today’s gospel. In each of the three expressions of piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, Jesus admonishes his hearers to avoid self-aggrandizing motives. That is if you are giving alms (lit. showing mercy), give for the sake of giving, not to draw attention to yourselves and expect praise. If you pray, even in public, do so because you are motivated by your relationship with God, not to garner the attention of others. When fasting, do not treat it as an opportunity to brag, complain, or seek pity. In each scenario, Jesus insists that a person examines their motivation for acts of worship and piety, and seeks the most authentic, God-directed, expressions possible.

Reflection

It often strikes people as odd, if not hypocritical, that we read this gospel passage on the very day that the ashes on our foreheads proclaim our Christianity most overtly. Shouldn’t the sign of faith be quieter or more discrete? In fact, the ashes mark an important first step in living a life of authentic faith that does not seek the attention of others. While we receive the ashes as a community of faith,

today's liturgy marks the start of six weeks of focussing a bit more intentionally on our personal relationship with God. Perhaps we might consider making recent events in the Church more of our "own." For example, while Pope Francis visited Canada in 2022 to offer words of sorrow and apology for the Church's role in the Residential School system, Lent is a time that invites us to participate personally in his gesture. We return to God first in our hearts, and then together, as a whole community.

Reflecting the Word in Song

Again We Keep This Soemn Fast (ERHALT UNS, HERR)	CBW 352
Ashes (T. Conry)	G 643 / GP 19
Attende Domine / Have Mercy on Us, Lord (arr. T. Thomson)	SS 156
Be With Me (T. Booth)	SS 273
Blest Be the Lord (D. Schutte)	G 437 / GP 31
Change Our Hearts (R. Cooney)	G 285 / GP 39
Come and Journey with a Savior (BEACH SPRING)	CBW 476
Come Back to Me / Hosea (G. Norbet)	G 282
Grant to Us, O Lord (L Deiss)	CBW 621A
Loving and Forgiving (S. Soper)	CIS 6.22
O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days (ST. FLAVIAN)	CBW 367
Refiner's Fire (B. Doerksen)	SS 160
Remember Your Love (M. Balhoff, D Ducote, G. Daigle)	G 641 / GP 183
Return to God (M. Haugen)	G 283

This Season Calls Us (CONDITOR ALME SIDERUM)
CIS 6.19

March 6, 2022 1st Sunday of Lent, A

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: Genesis 2:7–9, 16–18, 25;
3:1–7

When this story opens, creation is a dry, rainless paradise that is watered by a gushing spring (Gen 2:4–6). God forms the first man (literally, human) from the dust of the ground, shaping and molding this new creature and breathing "the breath of life" into his nostrils. The Man (in Hebrew, *ha-adam*), is animated by God's breath. In the narrative sequence, the garden of Eden is planted *after* the Man is created, and the Man is placed in it. The Woman is created from the side of the Man while he is in the garden. Thus, the Woman is fashioned out of material that is already animated by the Breath of Life.

As is well known, the Woman listens to the voice of the serpent, sees that the fruit is desirable, takes and eats the fruit, and offers some to the Man who also takes and eats it from her. A great deal can be discerned by attuning to the language of sensory perception in this passage. The serpent assures the woman that her eyes will be opened after she eats the fruit, but somehow she "sees" that the fruit is good to eat before ingesting it. The goal was to become wise (Gen 3:6), yet in listening to the serpent, the Woman (and subsequently, the Man), act without wisdom. Wisdom, as defined in the Psalms and Proverbs, will be to "listen" to the Lord, and to heed God's instruction. The Woman and the Man discover their own human frailty, through the recognition of their nakedness.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is one of the seven penitential psalms (the others are Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143), The superscription associates the psalm with David's transgression against Bathsheba and

her husband. This connects the psalm to a very personal and clear moment of wrong-doing, and makes the psalm's confession of sin searing and heartfelt.

Second Reading: Romans 5:12–19

In this reading, Paul works through the theological implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. The underlying question is: how could the death and resurrection of one person be salvific for all? To respond to this question, Paul makes an analogy. Just as sin and death entered human experience through one man (Adam), so too Jesus' death and resurrection changes the possibilities of human experience. Through God's grace, the paschal mystery is a "free gift," offered to those who believe in the resurrection.

Gospel: Matthew 4:1–11

According to Matthew, immediately after Jesus' baptism he "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt 4:1). Before Jesus begins his ministry of preaching and healing, he first faces the challenges of "the Tempter" (Matt 4:3). These challenges encompass a range of Jesus' physical and existential experiences. First, the devil offers him food while he is fasting, and Jesus counters this temptation by referring to the nourishment that he receives from the "word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Next, the devil attempts to get Jesus to put his relationship with God to the test. In effect he is saying, "OK, if you're so close with God, throw yourself from the highest point of the Temple so that God will save you." Jesus again rebuffs the Devil, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16. Finally, the devil offers Jesus supreme worldly power and authority. Once again, Jesus rebukes him, demonstrating that his ministry will not be for self-aggrandizement, but for God's will.

A striking element of the temptation in the wilderness is the central role that scripture plays throughout this scene. Both Jesus and the Devil (in 4:6) draw from Old Testament scripture to support their positions, which demonstrates how easy it is to manipulate the

meaning of scripture to one's own ends. Jesus, of course, understands the written word of God in a way that the Devil cannot, namely, that scripture offers a glimpse of God's will, not a ticket to human worldly success.

Reflection

How can we be "like God"? In the first reading, the Serpent tells the Woman that transgressing the will of God will enable her to be like God. In the Gospel reading, the Devil tells Jesus that in exchange for worshipping him, he will give Jesus power over all kingdoms. Yet reaching beyond God's will is not how to become "like God," as if it were some kind of contest of strength. Instead, Jesus demonstrates that becoming like God means aligning oneself with God's desire for humanity, namely, to alleviate suffering, to work toward the flourishing of creation, and to recognize that only God as creator has true sovereignty.

Reflecting the Word in Song

Again We Keep This Solemn Fast (ERHALT UNS, HERR)	CBW 352
Be With Me (T. Booth)	SS 273
Blest Be the Lord (D. Schutte)	G 437 / GP 31
Blessed Be Your Name (M. & B. Redman)	SS 206
Eternal Lord of Love (OLD 124TH)	CBW 360
Gracious God (J. Manibusan)	SS 157
Change Our Hearts (R. Cooney)	G 285 / GP 39
Jerusalem, My Destiny (R. Cooney)	G 284
Jesus, Tempted in the Desert (EBENEZER)	CIS 6.17
Lead Me, Guide Me (D. Akers)	G 400
Led by the Spirit (KINGSFOLD)	CIS 6.18

Not By Bread Alone (D. Reagan) G 362

O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days
(ST. FLAVIAN) CBW 367

On Eagle's Wings (J.M. Joncas) G 433 / GP 151

Tree of Life (M. Haugen) CBW 373 / G 288

March 5, 2022 2nd Sunday of Lent, A

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: Genesis 12:1–4

This chapter marks the beginning of the ancestral narratives in the Book of Genesis, charting the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this passage, God instructs Abram (later called Abraham), to leave his country, kindred, and father's house, in order to go a new land. At the time of this commissioning, Abram was living in Haran in northern Mesopotamia in his father's household. In the ancient world, one's household and extended family were one's primary social unit, providing one with public recognition (a "name") and social security. God's instruction to Abram is in effect, "Get up, go, leave all of your connections, your livelihood, and your friends to go to a new land that I will show you where you will have to start from the beginning." In other words, God's instruction requires an enormous amount of trust and confidence in God, and Abram's acquiescence demonstrates his extraordinary faith.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 33

Psalm 33 celebrates God sovereignty as the creator. The psalmist insists that all people worship God, and expresses confidence in God's integrity and goodness.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1:8b–10

Paul's letters to Timothy stem from the later years of Paul's ministry. These letters, along with the Letter to Titus, are known as the

"Pastoral Letters," due to their emphasis on community life and instructions on how to lead an upright and moral life as a follower of Jesus. In this short excerpt, Paul acknowledges that a certain amount of suffering is part of Christian life. In the Greco-Roman world, any kind of suffering was viewed as a sign of moral and existential failure. For Christians, however, Paul rethinks suffering to be a way in sharing in, and cultivating, the trust Jesus placed in God the Father. Paul affirms that believers have been called by God's grace, a grace extended to humanity through Christ Jesus "before the ages began," and which now is made manifest in the "appearing (*epiphaneías*) of our Saviour Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 1:10). Long before the doctrine of the Trinity is articulated by the Church, Paul intuitively understands the eternal action of the Word (revelation) of God, made fully manifest in Jesus.

Gospel: Matt 17:1–9

All of the synoptic gospels include the Transfiguration scene. Matthew's account emphasizes Jesus' continuity with Moses, through the detail of Jesus' face shining (cf. Exod 34:35), and both Moses and Elijah experienced God's presence on a mountain (Exodus 19 and following, and 1 Kings 19). The presence of Elijah is also significant because Elijah was expected to appear in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah (Mal 4:5). However, although Moses and Elijah "appeared to them," the most important revelation is of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. God's voice from the "bright cloud" announces Jesus' status as God's beloved son, and God instructs the disciples to listen to him (Jesus), just as Israel was instructed to "Hear!" the word of God in scripture (Deut 6:4). The disciples are overcome with fear and fall to the ground—a posture associated with awe in the presence of a theophany (see Ezekiel 1:28). Oddly, Jesus' first instruction to the disciples is that they are to tell no one about the vision until "after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (Matt 17:9). Why would this be? One of the most curious aspects of the synoptic gospels is the so-called "Messianic secret"—Jesus' instructions *not* to reveal his identity. This was

likely so that the wide range of messianic hopes would not obscure his ministry of healing and proclamation of the kingdom.

Reflection

Have you ever felt called by God or moved by the Spirit, but hesitated because the outcome or future was not clear? In today's readings, both Abram and Jesus' disciples must respond with confidence and trust. Abram had to leave his family and journey to an unknown land, while the disciples had to leave the mountain top and return to normal life, without telling anyone of what they had witnessed. For the disciples and for Abram, the way ahead was not clear, and would involve suffering, yet their willingness to listen indicates the profound depths of their relationship with the God and God-Incarnate. In what ways can we, too, listen to God, even when the way forward is not clear?

Reflecting the Word in Song

Again We Keep This Solemn Fast
(ERHALT UNS, HERR)

CBW 352

Christ, Be Our Light (B. Farrell)

CIS 6.31 / SS 207

Christ, You are the Fullness (ARIRANG)

CBW 431

Dwelling Place (J. Foley)

G 418 / GP 63

Eye Has Not Seen (M. Haugen)

CBW 482 / G 450

From Glory to Glory (J. Francois, A. Assad)

SS 119

I Am the Light of the Lord (G. Hayakawa)

G 355

In Christ There is no East or West (MCKEE)

CBW 529

O Bless the Lord (J. Michaels)

CBW 562

O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days
(ST. FLAVIAN)

CBW 367

Open My Eyes (J. Manibusan)

SS 337

Praise to You, O Christ, Our Savior (B. Farrell)

CBW 442 / G 360

Transfigure Us, O Lord (B. Hurd)

SS 164

You are the Way (NICOLAUS)

CBW 441

The Scrutinies and Dismissals

In keeping with the original baptismal meaning and purpose of the Lenten season, the RCIA has restored the practice of the "scrutinies" on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays. These are more than a mere formality as adults prepare to be baptized. Rather, celebrated well, they can be a powerful opportunity for all of us to reflect on how all of us have sometimes fallen short in living out our baptismal vocation. It's vital that they be celebrated publicly, amid the Sunday assembly, to give us all that chance.

Similarly, catechumens are dismissed from the mass after the Liturgy of the Word, before the "Universal Prayer". Rather than an unwelcoming statement that the unbaptized are somehow "unworthy" to be around us, the dismissals are a reminder that the rest of the liturgy is the work of those of us who remain. It's a valuable sign of the importance of the whole baptismal priesthood in the Eucharistic liturgy.

It's worth noting, however, that these rites are part of the RCIA's original design and purpose: preparing adults for *baptism*. These rites are for catechumens. The official texts are a little ambiguous about what to do with already-baptized candidates for full communion, but this is a case in which it's

good for one stipulation in the RCIA to be strictly observed: “Anything that would equate candidates for reception with those who are catechumens is to absolutely avoided.” (#391) Scrutinies and dismissals are for catechumens. Ideally, candidates, even if they cannot yet receive with us from the table, should be allowed to remain with the rest of us baptized if possible, ensuring that they don’t look like catechumens, so that the dignity of their baptism is respected.

March 12, 2023

3rd Sunday of Lent, A

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: Exodus 17:3–7

The events in this passage take place shortly after the Israelites have fled Egypt, and the reality of their freedom comes with the awareness that they must provide for their own food and water. They can no longer rely on the fertile abundance resulting from proximity to the Nile. There is a bit of irony here: the people escaped from Egypt because of a miraculous event involving water. Now, however, they do not have enough water, and their confidence in Moses’ leadership begins to wane. God instructs Moses to take his staff and strike “the rock at Horeb” (Exod 17:6). Horeb (also called Sinai) is the mountain where Moses encountered God in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–2) and where God will later give Moses the Torah for the people (Exodus 19–24).

When Moses strikes the rock, causing water to burst forth, the people’s reaction is not narrated. Instead, we learn that Moses names the place “Massah and Meribah”—words derived from the terms for “test” and “quarrel” respectively. Moses also says that the people had asked “Is the Lord among us or not?” though that question was not previously recorded. Nevertheless, the question of the Lord’s presence among them alerts us to the series of questions voiced by the people and Moses in this passage: “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” (Exod 17:2), “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (17:3), and finally “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to

stone me” (17:4). These questions reveal a great deal of unrest and fractiousness within the community, which is only healed when water miraculously flows from the rock. Notice that God assures Moses of his presence, “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb” (17:6), and the water flowing from the rock is a sign that God has not abandoned the people.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95

Psalm 95 is well known as the long psalm for the Liturgy of the Hours. This psalm celebrates God as a great King who commands all of creation.

Second Reading: Romans 5:1–2, 5–8

This short passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans is replete with important theological concepts, which are set against the historical context of Paul’s first century Greco-Roman life. Verses 1–2 express Paul’s insight that a right relationship with God is brought about through faith. In Paul’s day this would have been a very counter-cultural notion, for nearly all religious devotion was expressed through sacrifices and offerings. Paul asserts that through faith and God’s grace, believers participate in the peace of God. Furthermore, believers can hope of sharing in God’s glory—a claim that comes from Paul’s deepest convictions. Yet how can Paul make such a claim?

In the next section Paul says, “rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.” Greco-Roman society was fuelled by a system of honour (public recognition and prestige) and shame (public derision and avoidance). Some writings from ancient Stoic philosophers indicate that a

person should offer his life in place of another person only if the person he was replacing was of an equal or higher social position. That is, only if the intended victim had the same or more honour as the volunteer. To die willingly on behalf of a less honourable person would bring dishonour upon the volunteer (even in death), and on the volunteer's family. Paul is amazed that Jesus willingly accepted a sinner's death. Jesus' resurrection indicates that he was fully righteous (i.e. without sin), and so Paul understands his death as being for the sake of others (see Gal 2:20). In contrast to the cultural norm, Jesus offered his life for those less honourable than himself.

Gospel: John 4:5–42

The Samaritan Woman's unexpected encounter with Jesus at Jacob's well is replete with historical, cultural, and theological meaning. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 BC, the population remaining in Samaria gradually grew apart from the Judeans in the south. By Jesus' time, Samaritans and Jews were distinct groups who harboured animosity toward each other.

Jesus, contrary to all social norms, breaks the silence and speaks to the woman first, asking for a drink. Notice how the Woman immediately delineates their differences, "How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Her words sharply expose their social opposition. However, their meeting at Jacob's well evokes Rachel's approach to Jacob (Genesis 29), and indeed, when the woman begins to realize that Jesus is not a threat, she asks if he is greater than "our ancestor Jacob" (John 4:12). In this way, she hearkens back to their shared heritage, and from there the tension in the conversation gradually eases, and the Woman feels emboldened to ask Jesus questions concerning the proper place of worship.

Frequently, concerns regarding the Woman's marital status prevent hearers from truly appreciating the power of her encounter with Jesus. There is no doubt that if the Woman has been married five times previously, she has

had a very difficult life. Although the phrase, "the one you have now is not your husband (lit. man)" (4:18) might sound suggestive to our ears, it is worth remembering that she could be living with a son, a brother, an uncle, or brother-in-law, since in Jesus' day, a woman's survival depended on her being part of a household with a patriarch. Sometimes the reference to the woman's five husbands is understood allegorically, to refer to worship practices of Samaritans that were derided by the Judeans.

A more fruitful approach to interpreting this passage is to focus on the way the Woman addresses Jesus, and how this changes over the course of their encounter. The Woman refers to Jesus as "You, a Jew" (4:9); then "Sir" (lit. "Lord") (4:11); "Jacob" (4:12); "a prophet" (4:19); and finally, questioningly, "Messiah?" (4:29). Stunningly, as the Woman grows in her exchange with Jesus, her identity changes: "me, a Woman of Samaria" (4:9); "Woman" (4:11, 15, 17, 19, 21); and finally "testifying woman" (4:39). Although the NRSV renders the latter phrase as "the woman's testimony," it is more properly a new identity: she is the Testifying Woman, who brings news of her encounter to her people.

Reflection

Today's readings are used in Year A as well as during years when RCIA candidates are preparing for reception into the Church. In a profound way, the gospel passage presents a model of encounter and dialogue with Jesus. The Samaritan Woman's experience demonstrates how we can bring our whole selves to Christ—we can bring our worries and questions, our pasts and our shortcomings—and we can leave transformed and ready to share our experience with others.

Reflecting the Word in Song

All Who Are Thirsty (B. Brown & G. Robertson)	SS 204
As a Doe (T. Kenzia)	GP 15
Bread for the World (B. Farrell)	CIS 6.1 / G 596
Change Our Hearts (R. Cooney)	G 285 / GP 39
Come to the Water (J. Foley)	G 340 / GP 52 / SS 281
Healing Waters (T. Thomson)	SS 294
Jerusalem, My Destiny (R. Cooney)	G 284
Led by the Spirit (KINGSFOLD)	CIS 6.18
Like a Shepherd (B. Dufford)	CBW 490 / G 251 / GP 125
My Soul is Thirsting (S. Angrisano)	SS 71
O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days (ST. FLAVIAN)	CBW 367
Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness (NETTLETON OR HYFRYDOL)	CBW 582
Praise to You, O Christ, Our Savior (B. Farrell)	CBW 442 / G 360
Surely it is God Who Saves Me (RAQUEL)	CBW 500
With Joy You Shall Draw Water (M. Haugen)	CBW 237 / G 129

March 19, 2023

4th Sunday of Lent, A

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6–7, 10–13

This brief passage describes the anointing of David, son of Jesse, as king. At first, Samuel assumes that one of David's brothers will be the king, but the Lord instructs Samuel to look

beyond customary signs of authority, such as height and stature. Instead, David, the youngest and a shepherd, is the chosen one. In addition to his red hair and beautiful eyes, David is described as “handsome” —in Hebrew: “tov” or “good.” This small word hearkens back to the creation story, in which God declares elements of creation “good.” Indeed, just as during the creation account the spirit of the Lord hovered over the waters, here at David's anointing God's spirit comes “mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13).

Although David is clearly and carefully selected, his anointing takes place while Saul is still king over Israel. The fullness of David's reign will not emerge until after Saul's death when the various tribes of Israel acclaim him as their king (2 Samuel 5). David's deep devotion to God includes his respect for Saul's kingship while it lasts (see 1 Samuel 24 and 26).

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 23

This beautiful and well-known psalm expresses confidence in God's attentiveness and nearness during times of peace and of danger. The psalmist moves from a fertile pasture to a dark valley, and from the presence of enemies to the house of the Lord (or Temple). The journey is reminiscent of broader themes of Edenic beauty, the pain of expulsion, and finally the joy of covenantal fidelity.

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8–14

In this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses contrasting imagery of light and darkness to describe the new life believers have found in Christ. The light/dark dichotomy was not unique to Paul—certain manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls also use this imagery to describe the difference between community members and those on the “outside.” When we consider just how *dark* darkness would have been in the pre-industrial world, the association of light with life and darkness with death and danger is understandable. Paul's innovation is to association the Light, not with an event such as

a battle or ritual, but with a person, Jesus Christ.

Gospel: John 9:1–41

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs seven *signs* (rather than miracles), all of which gradually increase in intensity and reveal his identity. The healing of the man born blind is the sixth sign, and it is a profound theological reflection on God's relationship with humanity.

It is important to understand the cultural assumptions behind the disciples' question, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). In the Old Testament, certain passages indicate that blindness was considered a "defect." For priests, blindness prohibited them performing sacrifices in the Temple (Leviticus 21:16–24), and 2 Sam 5:8 may have been interpreted to prevent those who were blind from entering the Temple precinct at all. The concern regarding blindness (and other "defects" such as lameness, and broken limbs) was that these conditions would profane the holiness of the Temple, where God's presence—expressed as God's "glory"—was believed to dwell. In other words, a lack of holiness was regarded as inhospitable to God. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 28:28–29 lists blindness among the punishments for sinning against the covenant, while Exod 34:7 suggests that the consequences for sin were inter-generational. Finally, many passages in the prophetic texts use blindness as a metaphor for ignorance of God or lack of faith. Gathering these various passages together, the disciples' question reflects a complex cultural understanding of the nature of blindness, which came to function as symbolic of a lack of holiness and therefore antithetical to God. Thus, in addition to the daily difficulties the man would have faced attending to his physical needs, he would have also been culturally and socially maligned due to the associations of blindness with sin and lack of holiness.

Jesus' response to the disciples completely inverts their understanding of the man's blindness. Rather than indicative of God's

disfavor or absence, Jesus insists that the man lives with blindness so that "God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). Jesus' use of mud and saliva as a salve, and the man's bathing in the waters of the pool of Siloam, evoke the miraculous water events of the Old Testament. As he experiences light and vision for the first time, the man is not only cured of a medical condition, but his place in his society is also healed. However, his community members are the ones who do not recognize him (rather than, as expected, the other way around), and cannot detach their perceptions of him as a social and ritual outcast from his newly healed state. The man himself has no answer except, "If this man [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 9:33). The disbelief of the community in contrast to the man's insistence that Jesus is from God indicates that one's *soul*-vision is far more germane to one's relationship with God than one's *eye*-vision.

Reflection

Jesus' explanation that the man was born blind so that the works of God could be revealed in him, and his subsequent healing of the man, are simultaneously inspirational and difficult details. One would not want to suggest that the man's life and struggles as a person with blindness were only there so that Jesus could "fix" him and reveal God's glory. The deeper meaning of the passage is that it presents us with a figure whom society assumes cannot possibly have a relationship with or mediate God, and it turns this expectation completely on its head. This gospel invites us to challenge our own assumptions about where and when God works in our lives, and to be open to moments of surprise and rethinking of these assumptions.

Reflecting the Word in Song

Amazing Grace (NEW BRITAIN)

CBW 480 / SS 265

Blest Be the Lord (D. Schutte)

G 437 / GP 31

Christ, Be Our Light (B. Farrell)

CIS 6.31 / SS 207

Jesus, I Trust in You (A. McDonell, S. Hart)	SS 316
Healer of Our Every Ill (M. Haugen)	CBW 363 / G 642
Led by the Spirit (KINGSFOLD)	CIS 6.18
Open My Eyes (J. Manibusan)	SS 337
Praise to You, O Christ, Our Savior (B. Farrell)	CBW 442 / G 360
Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness (NETTLETON OF HYFRYDOL)	CBW 58
The Lord is My Light (L. Bounight)	G 429
There is a Longing (A. Quigley)	CIS 6.15 / SS 366
Tree of Life (M. Haugen)	CBW 373 / G 288
We Walk By Faith (M. Haugen)	CBW 495 / G 414
Word of God, Come Down On Earth (LIEBSTER JESU)	CBW 429

March 26, 2023

5th Sunday of Lent, Year A

Breaking Open the Word

First Reading: Ezekiel 37:12–14

Ezekiel was a priest living during the Babylonian Exile. He was among the first wave of Judeans who were exiled to Babylon, and his oracles range from admonishment to those who were still in Judah, to consolation, and finally to hope of restoration in the final chapters of the book.

The brief passage for today is part of the well-known “valley of dry bones” prophecy (Ezek 37:1–14). In this passage Ezekiel experiences a vision of a valley of dry bones, and when God asks him, “Mortal, can these bones live?”, Ezekiel wryly responds, “O Lord God, you know” (37:3). God then promises to cause the skeletal remains to revivify with flesh and skin,

and finally breath. As gruesome as it might sound, it echoes the pattern of creation of the first human in Genesis 2:7, indicating that this is a new creation.

Additionally, Ancient Israelite and Judean cosmologies speak of Sheol (or the Pit), as the realm of the dead, where everyone (rich or poor; good or evil) was consigned after death. It was believed to be a dark and murky underworld, populated by the shades of people who had died. Being in Sheol entailed a quasi-existence that was utterly cut off from God (see Psalm 33). Thus, God’s promise to open the graves and bring out the dead is a mighty assertion of power. It would have been an enormous source of hope for an exiled people.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 130

In Psalm 130 the voice of the psalmist rises up to God from “the depths.” The psalm is an expression of confidence in God’s mercy, God’s power to forgive, and God’s steadfast love.

Second Reading: Romans 8:8–11

This section of Paul’s Letter to the Romans comes near the end of the first half of the letter, wherein Paul has carefully articulated the oneness of faith shared by both Gentiles and Jewish believers in Jesus. In this brief passage, takes up another area of concern: the difference and relationship between the “Spirit” (*pneuma*) and the “flesh” (*sarx*). It is important to note that Paul does not suggest that believers are not flesh and blood human beings. Rather, his words are an encouragement avoid obsession with earthly, fleshly things, and instead to cultivate a life in Christ’s Spirit.

Gospel: John 11:1–45

Jesus’ stunning act of bringing Lazarus back into the realm of the living is the last of the seven “signs” in John’s Gospel. Like the other signs in the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus functions to reveal something of Jesus’ identity. This episode not only points to Jesus’ own death and resurrection, it also reveals Jesus as the one who breaches the realm of death and can call the dead forth by name.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, mourners have already gathered to support Martha and Mary. It was customary for the relatives of a deceased person to receive family and friends in the home, who would try to comfort them for the seven-day mourning period involving social isolation, fasting, and simple clothing. On the eighth day, the family of a deceased person was expected to “rejoin” the world again, laying aside their mourning customs. If Jesus has arrived on the fourth day (John 11:39), the sisters are already halfway through their mourning period.

Notice that Jesus himself does not go into the house as the other mourners do. Instead, Martha meets him while he is still some distance away from their home (11:20). Jesus is, therefore, somewhere between the house of mourning and the tomb of the dead.

Martha’s honesty is heartfelt and identifiable. She states plainly, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21). Yet then she goes on to say, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (11:22). Jesus declares, “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. Do you believe this?” (11:25–26). Without hesitating, Martha expresses her faith, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (11:27). Martha’s stunning expression of faith—reserved for Peter in the Synoptic Gospels—is a creedal statement that has not depended on first seeing a miracle. In other words, Martha is a model of true faith; she is a person who has been receptive to Jesus’ self-revelation.

When Mary leaves the house and comes to meet Jesus, she also expresses her dismay at Jesus’ delay, and we learn that Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33). Jesus’ emotion here is the same as in John 12:27, when his “soul is troubled” following the entry into Jerusalem. It suggests that Jesus is deeply aware that there is a very real cost to his mission and commitment to

God’s will. He is not unsympathetic to the sisters’ suffering.

As we noted in the first reading (above), the realm of the dead (Sheol, or The Pit), was believed to be a place that was completely cut off from communication with God. Jesus’ ability to call Lazarus by name and to command him to “come out!” points to the close relationship between Divine Son and Father, and also to the new age Jesus ushers in: no part of existence is beyond the reaches of God’s love and compassion.

Reflection

The raising of Lazarus is a profound, and frequently challenging, gospel story. We may share the sisters’ admonishment of Jesus, or even the skepticism of the bystanders in 11:27. We might wonder what Lazarus himself was feeling or thinking, although nothing of his reaction is described. Perhaps this gospel passage is an invitation to bring our most honest questions about our faith into prayer. We should feel able to say, as Martha and Mary effectively did, “Lord, where are you in my life right now?” and “What do I believe?”

Reflecting the Word in Song

Awake, O Sleeper (M. Haugen)	G 577
Be Not Afraid (B. Dufford)	CBW 481 / G 430 / GP 24 / SS 271
Eye Has Not Seen (M. Haugen)	CBW 482 / G 450
I Am the Bread of Life (S. Toolan)	G 597
I am the Resurrection and the Life (B. Hurd)	SS 161
I Know That My Redeemer Lives (WINCHESTER NEW)	CBW 647
I Know That My Redeemer Lives (S. Soper)	SS 131
I Will Not Die (T. Conry)	G 467
A Living Hope (M. Guimont)	CBW 613

On Eagle's Wings (J.M. Joncas)
G 433 / GP 151

Praise to You, O Christ, Our Savior (B. Farrell)
CBW 442 / G 360

Sing With All the Saints in Glory (HYMN TO JOY)
CBW 406

Tree of Life (M. Haugen)
CBW 373 / G 288

You Are the Way (NICOLAUS)
CBW 441

Palms

The Catholic faithful use palm branches at Mass on Palm Sunday and bring them home for devotional purposes. Palm Sunday is the popular name for the Sunday before Easter, though its full title is Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion. Two Gospel passages are proclaimed at Mass that day: One tells of people waving branches or spreading cloaks to welcome Jesus in triumph to Jerusalem, and the other tells of his passion and death.

Any branches may be used in the liturgy, but parishes usually provide palm branches, as mentioned in John's Gospel (12:13). The faithful hold them at the beginning of the Mass for the blessing and procession.

After Mass, people may bring the branches home as a sacramental. Various customs have developed. Some place branches behind a wall-mounted crucifix or other religious image. Others cleverly fold them into crosses. Still others incorporate blessed branches into improvised prayers for protection during harmful weather.

Used palm branches are burned the following year, and the ashes are placed on the heads of the faithful on Ash Wednesday. Some parishes burn their own ashes. People who wish to dispose of old palm branches may offer them back for burning or dispose of them at home in some reverent manner.

Palm branches appear in religious art as a symbol of martyrdom. In the Book of Revelation (7:9), a great multitude praises God with palm branches in hand. In the apocryphal gospel of pseudo-Matthew (20–21), a palm tree miraculously bends over to nourish the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt, and an angel plants one of its branches in paradise, making the palm a sign of victory in any contest.

Paul Turner

April 2, 2023 Passion (Palm) Sunday

Breaking Open the Word

First Gospel: Matthew 21 :1–11

Today's celebration begins with Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, there is no "one place" where scripture anticipates the coming of a messiah. Rather, messianic hopes developed over the centuries following the Babylonian Exile, through the contemplation of many different

passages from the historical books and prophets. One such passage is Zechariah 9:9–10, in which the prophetic oracle envisions the return of the king to Jerusalem ("daughter Zion"). In his day, Zechariah may have anticipated that Zerubbabel, a descendent of David, would regain the throne in Judah. After Zechariah, messianic expectations developed in several different directions, including the notion of the coming of a heavenly "Son of Man" who would overthrow worldly powers (Dan 7:13). By Jesus' time, Zechariah's prophecy had taken on a "fuller sense" (*sensus plenior*), that envisioned arrival God's Messiah

who would come to announce the inbreaking of the Reign (or Kingdom) of God. Jesus, who refers to himself as the Son of Man (see Matt 26:64), clearly understands himself to be God's anointed one.

As Jesus enters the city, the people shout words of praise and blessing. In Matthew, Mark, and John, the crowd also shout "Hosanna!"—a Hebrew word that means "Help!" or "Save us, please!", but which by now came to be understood as both a petition and an expression of praise. The words of the people are drawn from Psalm 118, which was one of the *Hallel* (Praise) psalms that was meant to be sung whilst on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The branches that the people are waving form another important symbolic detail. These branches would normally be associated with the Festival of Booths (one of the three great pilgrimage festivals, which also included Passover and Weeks (Pentecost)). The Festival of Booths was (and is still today) normally celebrated in the fall, and it is meant to recall God's providential care for the Israelites while they journeyed through the desert (Lev 23:40). During the Second Temple Period, the Festival of Booths is connected with worship of the King, the Lord of Hosts (Zech 14:16), as well as with the purification of the Temple after the Maccabean revolt (2 Macc 10:6–7). Notably, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple takes place immediately after his entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21:12–13).

What do these details (the shouts of praise, the donkey, and the branches) mean? Cumulatively, these represent many of the elements associated with the arrival of the messianic successor of David. Although the image of Jesus riding on a colt may seem humble, it conveys a clear message of the arrival of the Day of the Lord and the Messiah around whom the nations would gather.

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4–7

These few verses come from the portion of Isaiah known as "Deutero-Isaiah," which stems from the later Exilic and post-Exilic period in Babylon and Judah. Here, the prophet speaks in

the voice of the Servant of the Lord, who has totally aligned his will with that of God. After Jesus' death, his earliest followers began to understand these Servant Oracles in a new way, associating them with Jesus' life, ministry, and profound commitment to the will of the Father. In this oracle, the Servant proclaims his willingness to undergo persecution and his utter confidence that the Lord God sustains and strengthens him.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 22

In Matthew's and Mark's gospel, the Jesus' plaintive last words on the cross are drawn from the first line of Psalm 22. This is a psalm of individual lament, expressing the dehumanizing agony of a person who is stripped and mangled. However, midway through the psalm (Ps 22:21b), the psalmist shifts into a soaring expression of confidence and praise. Thus, when we associate this prayer with Jesus' dying moments, we might also consider how he was simultaneously alluding to the psalm's finale of deep trust in God.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6–11

Writing from prison, Paul urges the Philippians to be of the "same mind" as Christ Jesus (2:5). At first it seems as though Paul is simply trying to settle a community dispute (2:4), but as he continues his letter, he moves into the verses we hear as the second reading today. Most scholars suggest that 2:6–11 are not original to Paul, but rather that these lines circulated as an independent hymn about Christ that Paul knows and includes. The hymn unfolds in two movements, expressing the central paradox of Christ: on the one hand, Christ shares the "form" of God, but on the other hand, Christ has "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (2:7). The first movement describes how, after humbling himself, Jesus is "obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (2:8). Obedient to whom? Did God order Jesus to die? Or was Jesus obedient to the Romans in acquiescing to death?

Neither option is the correct interpretation. By referring to Jesus' obedience, the hymnist

expresses a far more theologically profound insight: Jesus' desire and will was fully conformed to the will of God the Father. This meant that Jesus, in every moment of his life, consciously and unconsciously, lived in the knowledge that God is Truth, Love, and Being itself. To have begged Pilate for his life would have been to acknowledge that Pilate (and therefore the Roman empire) was more authoritative. Instead, Jesus knew that the fullness of his obedience meant that he could not waver from his commitment to reveal God's absolute sovereignty—even if it meant his refusal to capitulate would result in his death.

The second movement of the hymn provides the resolution. Jesus' steadfast commitment to God results in his exaltation. Just as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah is "exalted" (Isa 52:13), so too Jesus is "highly exalted." Jesus' name itself becomes a means of expressing the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11).

Gospel: Matt 26:14–27:66

In today's liturgy we accompany Jesus from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his agonizing death on the cross. The passion narrative plunges us into the chaos of Jesus' last evening with his disciples, his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion, and we hear from many voices: Judas, Peter, the high priest, the woman in the courtyard, Pilate and his wife, the centurion, and of course, the crowds. Everyone has an opinion about who Jesus is and how they should respond to him.

Another perspective, of course, is offered to us, if we focus on what Jesus himself says throughout the passion narrative, and when and where he speaks. First, he directs his disciples to accommodations for the Passover meal. Next, he expresses that he knows he will be betrayed, yet still offers the bread and wine as his body and blood to his disciples. Jesus then goes with his disciples into the night, and requests that they keep vigil with him. The disciples fall asleep, abandoning him, while he speaks with the Father. At his arrest, he denounces the use of violence, reaffirming his commitment to fulfilling what has been

foretold in scripture. While facing the high priest, he quotes from Daniel 7:13 to refer to his ministry and identity. And after Pilate asks him if he is King of the Jews, Jesus simply responds "You say so." In other words, he chooses not to refute Pilate while at the same time insisting that Pilate discern for himself. After Jesus' exchange with Pilate, he does not speak again until his last words, "Eli Eli, lema sabachthani," the Aramaic for the beginning of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

As we listen to Jesus' words, are there patterns or rhythms that stand out? Notice how perceptive Jesus is of those around him. He recognizes their moments of weakness and betrayal, yet he remains committed to his task. Jesus also speaks directly to God in prayer. His prayers express a range of emotion. They are pleading, trusting, and even frightened (Psalm 22). Yet he still reaches out to the Father to pray, even when God's presence feels distanced.

Reflection

Throughout Christian history, Jesus' "cry of dereliction" on the cross has perplexed believers. Did Jesus mean that he no longer felt God in his life? Did God abandon Jesus? Or, was Jesus referencing the whole of Psalm 22 through reference to its first line (as is customary in Jewish tradition)? Overwhelmed by pain, Jesus asks the question that we all ask during moments of great suffering: "God, where are you? Why do you feel so far away? Have you forgotten me?" His cry, agonizing though it is, is a prayer that we too, can bring to God, for Jesus models suffering that includes God within it.

Reflecting the Word in Song

All Glory, Praise and Honor (ST. THEODULPH)
CBW 62

At the Name (J. Blakesley, S. Hart)
SS 268

Crown Him With Many Crowns (DIADEMATA)
CBW 437

Glory in the Cross (D. Schutte)
CIS 6.16 / SS 170

God, Whose Glory Reigns Eternal (BEACH
SPRING)
CBW 475

Hosanna (J. Berthier/Taizé)
CBW 59

Hosanna to the Son of David (T. Booth)
SS 165

Jesus, the Lord (R. O'Connor)
CBW 432 / G 304

Lift High the Cross (CRUCIFER)
CBW 435

O Sacred Head Surrounded (PASSION CHORALE)
CBW 378 / SS 172

Song of the Cross (S. HooKong-Taylor)
SS 167

Though in the Form of God (T. Barr)
CBW 687

Tree of Life (M. Haugen)
CBW 373 / G 288

What Wondrous Love is This (WONDROUS LOVE)
G 295 / SS 364

When I Behold the Wondrous Cross
(ROCKINGHAM)
CBW 382

Credits:

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