Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. Find us on the web at:
http://www.christiansforchrist.org

We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Roman Catholic Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures.

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 2:5

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a vision from the Prophet Ezekiel about the future resurrection of the people of Israel. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and then conclude with the chronicle of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel Chapter 37. Here Ezekiel was given a prophecy concerning the future restoration of the Nation of Israel. This was one of a series of visions that God gave to Ezekiel the night before the messenger came to him with the news that Jerusalem had been destroyed (Ezekiel 21). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus made a tiny down payment on this promised restoration of Israel through the raising of Lazarus. As we study the text, it's important to be diligent to distinguish between God's promises to Israel versus those made to the people of God as a whole. Saint Paul explains God's future plan for Israel in Romans Chapter 11. It's also important to recognize how portions of the prophecy have already been fulfilled by the time we are reading this versus what is yet to be fulfilled - through both Israel and the Church. Though the Gentiles have been "ingrafted" into God's kingdom (Romans 11:17), they are distinct from His Chosen People the Jews. Read the text, noting that we included the first eleven verses for context, as our readers note that we are prone to doing!

First Reading:

> *1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." 4 Again He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' 5 "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. 6 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.'" 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 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 come to life."'" 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. 11 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 has perished. We are completely cut off.' 12 "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 "Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. 14 "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37:1-14)*

God promised to restore the spiritually dead Israel to life through the sending of His Holy Spirit (v.14). We can say that this prophecy was at least partially fulfilled during several different events, but the final fulfillment will not happen until Daniel's fortieth Week during the end times. First, it was partially fulfilled during the times of the Old Testament when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. Second, the prophecy was partially fulfilled when Jesus Himself entered the temple (Mark 11:15). Third, the prophecy was partially fulfilled after Jesus' death and immediate entrance into heaven. We read from the Gospel of Saint Matthew:

> *51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:51-53).*

Only Saint Matthew made mention of the miraculous mini-resurrection that occurred immediately after Jesus' death. Imagine the appearance of a group of saints rising from the graves and walking about the City of God (Jerusalem)? These were not like the walking dead from the popular horror movies of our day, these were the "walking living" prophesied by the Prophet Ezekiel!

Continuing on the partial fulfillments of Ezekiel's prophesy, the fourth way in which it was fulfilled was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit of God was poured out onto the people in Acts 2:1-4. This was also the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

Taking into consideration the whole council of Scripture, the verses in Ezekiel and all of the other verses put together indicate that not only will Israel experience a spiritual awakening in the future, they, along with all of the believers in God the Messiah, will also experience a physical resurrection. In regards to the Nation of Israel, Ezekiel indicated that God would complete His divine plan through a future restoration of a national Israel. What form this will take, and whether the current re-gathering that is already happening will mature into final embodiment of what God has predicted is unknown.

As believers, we live with the hope of this resurrection, and this was the hope of which Paul spoke in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4. There Paul said, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1Thessalonians 4:14). He continued, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (vv. 16-17). Like what the saints experienced during their physical resurrection in Jerusalem immediately after Jesus gave His life for them, we too will experience resurrection. Later in the Gospel message we will see another of the types of "first fruits" of resurrection through Jesus raising of Lazarus. Lazarus rising from the dead was different from what is promised to him and all believers because he died a second physical death (Hebrews 9:27).

The importance of the resurrection prophesied in Ezekiel is multidimensional. For one, it shows God's power over death. Humans have devised a lot of ways to defeat common enemies that prematurely take physical life, but we have yet to find a cure for death. Jesus has conquered the grave, which shows that He is powerful enough to handle all the lesser stresses that we face (Eph. 1:18-20). I sometimes joke with people that if your problems require resurrection power or less, God's got you covered. Anything above that, though, and you're out of luck. Second, the bodily resurrection of the saints allows us to live with an eternal perspective. This gives us the impetus for a counter-cultural lifestyle that is able to give

ourselves away for higher purposes, because we know that this life is not all there is. Third, if we have said good-bye to loved ones in the Lord, the resurrection of the saints comforts us that death has lost its victory and sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). We will see our loved ones again in the Lord's presence.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
The second reading is from Chapter 8 of Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section Paul explained how only the spiritual man can please God, "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (vv. 7-8)." We included the first seven verses in order to provide the context.

Second Reading:

> *1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But 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. (Romans 8:1-11)*

Paul encouraged the Roman believers by telling them that they are not living in the flesh since (and if) the Holy Spirit of Christ lives in them (v.9). He said that those "in the flesh," meaning those on the broad road of destruction (Matthew 7:13), cannot please God; no matter how hard they try. In contrast, since the believer is born from above (John 3:3), the Holy Spirit gives them spiritual life in the present time and in the future will give them eternal, physical life (v.11). Paul said about the latter, "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (v.11b). This is a powerful hope given to us by God. We have an eternal way of life through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The second reading dovetails very nicely into the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 11 covering the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As we noted in the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, Lazarus' physical resurrection is a kind of first glimpse of what will happen to all believers in the literal, physical resurrection which is coming at the end of this age. Saint Paul said the following about this in 1 Corinthians 15:

> *50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this*

perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (1 Corinthians 15:50-54)

The context of the Gospel lesson was during the time of the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). Jesus had just finished making several bold claims about his identity as God in the flesh. He said, “I and the Father are One” (v.30). Because of this statement the Pharisees once again tried to stone Him, but again he evidently hid Himself from them and “escaped from their hands” (v.39b). Next Jesus travelled to Bethabara (John 10:40, John 1:28) where many came to believe in him (John 10:42). As you read the text try to see it in light of the fact that Jesus knew that He would die at the hands of His own people (John 18:4), an event that occurred just over a week after the time He heard the news about Lazarus.

Gospel Reading:

*1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." 4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was. 7 Then after this He *said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples *said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" 9 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. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 This He said, and after that He *said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." 12 The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. 14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." 16 Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him." 17 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. 20 Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. 21 Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." 23 Jesus *said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha *said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." 28 When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. 31 Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His*

*feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They *said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?" 38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, *said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." 44 The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. (John 11:1-45)*

Did you notice the repeating of certain key phrases throughout the text? Verses 17 – 39 follow a literary structure known as a "chiasm" which the author used in order to focus attention to a central portion of the text. The pattern is one of repeating or contrasting ideas on either side of a central verse that indicates the main focus of the author. Here the pattern picks up in verse 17 and 39. "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days," (v.17, emphasis added) and "Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days'" (v.39, emphasis added). A second phrase repeats in verses 21 and 32. "**Martha** then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died," (v. 21, emphasis added) and "Therefore, when **Mary** came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died'" (v.32, emphasis added). Notice that both Martha and Mary independently confirmed their belief that Jesus had the power to prevent Lazarus from dying from his sickness. The final repeating pattern is in verses 20 and 29 in which first Martha went to meet Jesus (v.21) and then Mary (v.29). The literary structure finally points to the main focus of the verses sandwiched between those containing repeating or contrasting ideas. This is found in verses 25 – 26: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"

The central passages from the chiasm above, taken with Jesus' opening statement in verse 4, illuminate the central truth in the Gospel lesson. "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, **so that the Son of God may be glorified by it**'" (v.4). And again, "Jesus said to her, '**I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"** (vv. 25-26). When Jesus said "I am" He made a powerful claim of divinity. In Chapter 10 Jesus repeated this phrase no less than five times which led to John saying, "There was again division among the Jews because of these words " (John 10:19). The bottom line is this. The purpose of Jesus' healing of Lazarus was for Jesus to glorify Himself as God (I am) because He is the only bearer of eternal life for all who believe.

Now let's look at some other details that emerge from the text. As Jesus approached the tomb, Martha warned Jesus that since Lazarus had been dead for four days there would be a stench. It's highly likely that she had either already smelled a dead body before, or possibly even smelled the odor that was coming out of Lazarus tomb. Regardless of the case, Martha showed concern for Jesus even though she

desired for Him to do something about Lazarus. We don't know whether either Mary or Martha believed Jesus could (or would) physically raise Lazarus from the dead. Martha testified that she believed Ezekiel's prophesy regarding the resurrection that we saw in the first reading. She said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (v.25).

Have you ever smelled the horrible stench of death? If you have, you would understand the reason for Martha's concern for Jesus in approaching Lazarus' tomb. I experienced the smell of death many years ago in my hometown, which is something that I have never forgotten. I remember one particular weekend when a car accident resulted in two deaths. Afterwards the fire department came and washed down the scene in an attempt to erase some of the carnage, and then the cars were towed to the local auto garage. Curiosity may have killed the cat but I just had to visit the auto garage parking lot to inspect the carnage. As I approached the crumpled up car and was still a good distance away I noticed a very strange odor. As I got closer, I smelled one of the most horrible odors that I had ever smelled in my life up to that point, and I was born on a farm with three brothers! It was so bad that I asked myself, what was I thinking by coming over here to see the wreckage? Now over 30 years later I can still remember the stench. Martha knew about this as well, that the smell of death was so bad that she needed to warn Jesus. The importance of this point for our daily lives is to remind us of Christ's power over not only the stench of death (which is very real), but also the consequences of death itself. Praise be to God!

The text said that Jesus was **deeply moved** with concern for Lazarus and his sisters. John said so twice in the text (verses 33 and 38). This story contains the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, "Jesus wept." Of course, the verse markings were added to the Bible much later than the original writing. However, clearly John's recording of Jesus' response to his friends' Mary, Martha and Lazarus is extremely significant. If Jesus, God in the flesh, Immanuel, meaning "God with us" wept over the death of a single friend, how much more does God grieve over *our* pain, suffering and eventual death?

What happened next probably astounded them beyond words. When Jesus called to Lazarus from the tomb, he emerged alive as a living testimony to God's power over death. Evidently, many other Jews were watching and because of this miracle they too came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (v.44). What a glorious celebration they must have had. The sisters' terrible suffering turned into immense joy as Lazarus was not only brought back to life but also healed from the condition which resulted in his death in the first place.

Reflection Questions

1. The main point of the story of Lazarus' was to show this central truth that Jesus declared about Himself:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus still declares this truth about Himself and asks the question to you. Do you believe this? If so, what difference does this make in your life? If not, what is holding you back from believing His resurrection power?

2. The second reading from Romans 8 sets up a sharp contrast between living according to the flesh or living according the Spirit. Turn back to that and **underline** the words/phrases that describe the flesh and **circle** the words/phrases that describe the Spirit. Which of these words/phrases most describe your present condition? Which words/phrases would you like to be descriptive of you? Talk to God about this desire.

Keywords: Fifth Sunday of Lent, Lectionary 34