Romans 8:1–11

Other Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 130; John 11:1–45 (46–53)

The readings today show us a glimpse of the final goal of this Lenten journey. They show us why we have these 40 days of self-denial, of giving up foods and habits. It is because of the resurrection. All these readings are about having new life and leaving the old behind. It is being with God, who is the resurrection and the life, and denouncing sin and death and the devil. We have this journey of Lent and in general as part of the Christians life is because this resurrection is ours already.

The gospel reading is quite obvious as Jesus himself is approaching Jerusalem for the last time. And in fact it was this story, this incident with the raising of Lazarus that prompted the religious leaders’ murderous intent. But of course as Jesus himself says, he lays his life down of his own accord. It was God’s will that his only begotten son should die and the high priest prophesied this without even knowing it. The OT on the other hand also has a resurrection story, though it was a vision to show to the people of Judah, through the eyes and ears and mouth of the prophet, that God will restore them back from their Babylonian exile. They have thought that they would never return and that God had abandoned them, but this resurrection points to a greater resurrection which we see in the NT, Jesus himself.

The interesting thing in this OT story is that even when the sinews and flesh and skin covered the dry bones, there was still no life in them. It is missing one thing: the breath. And this is not referring to oxygen or any gases that the body needs to survive, because the Hebrew word for breath is also the word for spirit (and wind). What is missing in this exceedingly great army of corpses is the spirit of God. It is the presence of this spirit that distinguishes between life and death, at least from God’s point of view, which we confess in the Nicene creed: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the lord and giver of life. And our epistle reading today tells us exactly what that means for us in this life. Because, again, life and being alive consists in the presence of the spirit, or in other words, not having the spirit means death, it means being like that great army in the OT reading with a fully functioning physical body, but it is still dead before God.

Indeed, we have received the Holy Spirit of God, first through baptism and continually through the hearing of the word of God as well. And Paul’s words to the Roman Christians 2000 years ago in verse 9 is also for us: You, however, are not in the flesh but in the spirit. And he continues in verse 10 and 11 with the result of this spirit: “although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness” and “he who raised Jesus will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you.”

What Paul is talking about here is a contrast between the flesh and the spirit. As we continue in these last 2 weeks of Lent, we need to be reminded again of this conflict that we have in side each of us. But above all, we need to be reminded that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is for us, for our life, and it is for today. It is new life, not in an abstract theological ideology inside an ancient book, but it is real life, lived in the present.

Paul begins this dichotomy in verse 2, saying: “for the law of the spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Here, Paul is not saying that there are 2 kinds of “law”, each coming from 2 sources and producing different effects. There is only 1 law, the law of God. However this law has 2 results depending on the recipient. When received by the weak or sinful flesh (v3), it leads to rebellion and sin and finally death. But when received in the spirit, the law of God leads to righteousness and life with God. Thus the distinction here is a life in the flesh versus a life in the spirit(v4).

Paul explains what this conflict of flesh and spirit looks like in the day to day living. First, it is not, as some people may think, a distinction between material versus immaterial, or physical versus non-physical. This is how the Buddhists and the Gnostics and various philosophies think, which is false. No, rather, it’s all about sin versus righteousness, or the things of our sinful nature against the righteousness that comes from God. This is shown when God himself came in the flesh (v3), thereby showing that the physical flesh is not inherently sinful. On the contrary, by coming in the flesh and remains in the flesh forever, our lord Jesus Christ honors it and even gives his flesh and blood to nourish our souls. Therefore we should not disparage our bodies and treat it with contempt, but honor it as did our Lord, and take care of it, even in death and the grave (if possible, since cremation is cheaper and is more openly accepted than before). Many Christians still prefer burial over cremation because we will be raised again in this body, though it will be a glorified one. This is the temple of our God and will remain the temple of our God forever, even when we are in the grave.

So if it is not the physical body that Paul is talking about, then what it this “flesh”, what is the problem that leads to death? Here it is clear that Paul is talking about the flesh of sin. It is the sinful nature inherited from Adam. Its effects is so deep that not only weakens so that we cannot fulfill the righteous requirements of the law, but it kills. Sometimes theologically we say that the “law of God” kills, but practically, it is our own sinful natures that brings death. The law has the effect of making us aware of our dying condition. A man can be very sick but without knowing it, especially if the disease is so deep inside and does not have any symptoms, but it is killing him. When he goes to the doctor and after the examination, the doctor tells him that he has cancer and has less than a year to live, the cancer not only is killing him in his body, but such revelation from the doctors bring terror and devastates the mind. Such is our condition in the flesh, this sinful flesh. It does not only kill us, but it exhibits all sorts of “sinful” conditions called “sin” such as hate, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, lust, stealing, covetousness, falsehood, lying, etc.

The flesh cannot be righteous because its mind or mindset is only thinking about sin and how it can please oneself rather than God. In fact Paul says that this mind is hostile to God (v7). That’s the effect of the knowledge of sin and a righteous God. It hates God and everything that comes from God because it thinks of God as his enemy, his oppressor, his slave master whose only intent is to bind him in misery with the Law. Although we may try to do the law, it will never please God for the mind and the heart is still filled with hate and contempt for the law and the God who gave the law. It is like that man who heard the bad news about his disease and now hates the doctor for telling him the truth, yells at the doctor and storms out of the hospital and vows to never see a doctor again. It sounds strange and silly but that’s how we are. We deny that we are sinful, we deny that our sin is really that bad, we deny that we have sinned, and we run and hide. We hear the word of God but does not turn to this great doctor for help.

That’s why Paul reminds us, by the working of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus came in the flesh but who also lives in the spirit. He came in the flesh to show us that God does care for us and our sinful condition of the flesh. But more importantly, Paul says in verse 4 that he came in the flesh so that he might fulfill the righteous requirement of the law for us and in us. Jesus’ whole life from birth to death was the perfect keeping of God’s law and he did it for you in that he gives his perfect righteousness to us so that we might stand before God without any blemish. And in the spirit, we know that his is our because Jesus died on the cross to take our sins, and on the third day he is raised so that sin and death are swallowed up forever. As Paul says in verse 1, there is therefore NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No sin, no condemnation, no death. This is to show that there is a second path, that is, the path of repentance and life. The doctor shows and tells the man of his disease not because he wants to shame the man or to make him feel bad and depressed, but so that the doctor can help and heal the man. God has shown us the path of the flesh and sin and death, and he desires that we come to him for help and mercy and salvation, which he does give in the forgiveness of sins. And we have this gift in the very body and blood of Jesus Christ, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. And this spirit continues to work repentance and faith in and through our baptismal calling. For in chapter 6, Paul tells us that we have died to sin and raised to newness of life through baptism, how can we still live in it, which is an oxymoron, a contradiction that is not life at all.

Therefore in the spirit we see that the law is good. In Christ, we are no longer living in the flesh, but in the spirit. Repentance then also means renouncing of our sins and asking God for help in subjecting our sinful flesh, which is what this season of Lent is all about. And this is a daily exercise and battle, for we cannot forget for one moment that we still have this sinful flesh around us. And so as we continue to journey toward Easter, let us fix our eyes on Jesus who is our resurrection and life. And in this in mind, let us daily journey in faith and repentance toward that final and glorious resurrection that is ours forever.