

## The Fifth Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 37:12-14
<i>Response</i>	For with the Lord is mercy, with him is plenteous redemption
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 11:1-45

The fifth Sunday in Lent for year A continues our journey in the second readings through the letters of St. Paul and some key passages in Paul that can be related to the Lenten season. And for the Gospel for this Sunday, it's about the resurrection of Lazarus. And it's a very important text because Lazarus' resurrection and Jesus' power to raise him from the grave is a kind of sign—it's one of the signs of Jesus in the Gospel of John—that point forward to our own resurrection. As Jesus says to Martha in John 11:

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live...”

So Lazarus' resurrection points forward to our resurrection, and so the Church gives us today a very powerful and important text from the letter to the Romans by St. Paul that's all about the resurrection from the dead and also—this is important—about how those of us who are in Christ are no longer to live in the flesh but in the Spirit. So let's read the passage. This is one of the most misunderstood images in all of Paul's letters. It might be the one that gets most misunderstood—the language of flesh and spirit. So I'm going to read the text, and we will unpack it and put it in its first century Jewish context, which is really going to help us understand what Paul is talking about. So in the reading for today, Romans 8:8-11...it's a short passage, but it says this...very rich:

...those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive 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 give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.<sup>1</sup>

What is this passage about? What is Paul talking about? In particular, that first line is really striking:

...those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

What does that mean? Does that mean that as long as I'm in my body, I can't please God? That's a strange thing for Paul to say. Well, the answer to that is no, that's not what he means. But this is a classic example of Paul using technical Rabbinic (or Jewish) categories and Jewish terminology in ways that can be easily misunderstood by non-Jewish readers. So we need to go back, and we need to put these in context.

So there are two key terms necessarily for understanding Paul's words today—flesh and spirit. The Greek word for flesh is *sarx*, and the Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*. So let's look at each one of those together. In order to understand what Paul's talking about here, the first point we want to make is this: when Paul uses the word “flesh” (*sarx*), he does not simply mean your body. There's a Greek word for body—*sōma*. Now we're going to come back to that in just a minute. He will mention the word *sōma* when he talks about the resurrection of the body. But when he says you “are in the flesh” and that those who are in the flesh cannot please God, “the flesh” for Paul here is a technical term that refers to this fallen world of sin and death. It's a state in which we dwell. And when he talks about the spirit, he doesn't mean your soul. People tend to think, “Oh, flesh means body and spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

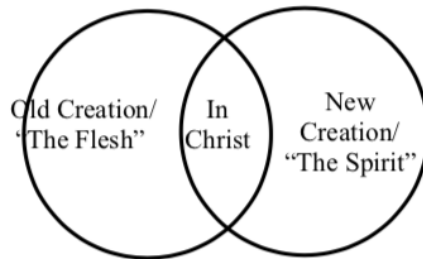
means soul.” No. For Paul, *pneumatōs* spirit is a term that he will use repeatedly to refer to the new creation—the power of God to bring about a new creation in the resurrection of light and life...eternal life. It’s another sphere of reality, in other words. And when Paul makes these...when he’s using these two terms, he’s really drawing on two categories from the Jewish theology in his day—actually, specifically from Jewish eschatology, Jewish beliefs about the end of time.

In Jewish writings from the time of Paul and later, there are these two spheres of reality. One of them was known as “this world,” which referred to this world, this present world of sin and suffering and death. And the other one was called “the world to come” or “the age to come,” and that referred to the new world that Isaiah said that God would make in the age of salvation. So if you go back and look at the book of Isaiah 64-65, it says that God is going to recreate the world, that He’s going to make a new Heavens and a new Earth in which righteousness dwells and immortality. And there’s not going to be any crying or pain or suffering anymore.

So in Jewish theology, you had these two spheres— “this world” and “the world to come”...or “this age” and “the age to come.” Or you can call them the old creation of sin and death and then the new creation of righteousness and eternal life. And so Paul inherits these categories, this expectation that the old creation or this realm is going to be followed by a new creation or “the world to come.” But Paul uses his own terminology to refer to these two realities, and he’ll talk about the old creation using the terminology of “the flesh.” So if we’re in the flesh, it means we’re in the old creation, and we’re under the power of sin and death and the devil and all that kind of stuff. And then he’ll also use the word “the spirit” to refer to the realm or the sphere of the new creation that has been ushered in by Christ.

And what’s different about Paul’s theology from common Jewish theology—you might find, say, in writings like 4th Ezra or 2nd Baruch—is that in other Jewish works from the time period, the idea would be that the old creation and the new creation were sequential. In other words, when the old creation comes to an end, then the new creation will follow. But Paul is different. Paul actually sees these two spheres of reality—the old creation and the new creation—as overlapping one another in time. And in that middle sphere, in that realm where they overlap, is Christ Himself. So once a person is baptized or is “in Christ,” in a sense they have

a foot in both worlds. On the one hand, through Baptism they become a new creation, as Paul says in Galatians 6. They no longer belong to the old world. They no longer belong to the flesh, the realm of sin and death.



On the other hand, until the resurrection takes place at the end of time, we still in a sense live within the flesh and within this old world. So although we belong to Christ, we belong to the power of the Spirit and the new creation, we still have one foot in this world of sin and death...in the flesh. So in a nutshell...you might be thinking, “Oh, Dr. Pitre, this is getting confusing.” Let me just...in a nutshell, here’s the point. When Paul talks about the flesh, he’s frequently referring to the old creation, this realm of sin and death. And when he’s talking about the spirit, he talks about...he’s speaking of the new creation and the realm of the resurrection in the life of Christ.

So when he says to the Ephesians that:

...those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:8)

What he means is...people who are living in the old creation under the power of sin and death and the devil. They’re living according to the flesh, according to the fallen world. They cannot please God.

But you...

—now he’s speaking to his Christian audience—

...are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Romans 8:9)

So how is it that we belong to the realm of the Spirit, belong to the realm of the new creation? It’s through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which as we’ve seen

elsewhere in Paul—1 Corinthians 12, Galatians 4—we receive in our Baptism. So effectively, what Baptism does for Paul is it moves you from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit, so that you're no longer under the dominion of sin and death and the devil...but rather, you become a member of the Body of Christ.

And what Paul goes on to say here is, “Look, if you don't have the Spirit of Christ, you don't belong to Him.”

But if Christ is in you...

—notice the image here is of an indwelling—

...although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:10)

Now what does he mean by that? Well, think about it this way. Once a person is baptized, they receive the Spirit of Christ, they receive the Holy Spirit. But that doesn't mean that their bodies aren't going to suffer and die. They're still going to experience the effects of sin. From a visible point of view, they're going to still look like they're under the power of sin and death because they're going to get sick, they're going to suffer, and they're going to die. Which, by the way, is why some of Paul's readers, the Thessalonians, started to become alarmed when Christians began to die in that first generation. Because they assumed, “Oh wait, once we've been baptized, we're not going to die. We're just going to live until the resurrection takes place.” And in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul has to write to them and say, “No, no, no. Don't worry. Those that have died in the Lord have not perished, but they will be raised from the dead when Christ returns.”

So there was a very strong awareness of the fact that if you are baptized, you have died to this world, the old creation, and become a member of the new creation in Christ. But Paul here is explaining the mystery, even though Christ is in us, our bodies are dead because of sin, and it's our spirits that are alive because of righteousness. And what happens in Baptism, Paul says, is:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)

So notice the language Paul uses here. When he wants to talk about our physicality, when he wants to talk about our body participating in the resurrection, he doesn't use the language of the flesh. He uses the language of the body. He doesn't use *sarx*; he uses *sōma* in Greek there. So, why do I bring that up? Because it's very important for us to understand that the Gospel that Paul is preaching here is not simply about the immortality of the soul. It's about the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body.

Paul, like any good first century Jew, expects that in the new creation, when God makes all things new, He's not going to disembodify human beings. They are created in a bodily form all the way back in Genesis 2. Instead, what He's going to do is make their bodies into new creations so that they can live forever in a new Heavens and a new Earth—a new creation as Isaiah describes it.

So what Paul's trying to do here in the letter to the Romans is explain in a nutshell: You don't live in the realm of the flesh anymore. Even though you're living in this world, that's not really where you belong, because once you receive the Spirit of Christ, you now belong to the new creation.

However, if you look at your body, it looks like you're still under the power of sin and under the power of death because you are going to suffer and die. But the Spirit that you have received has been given as a pledge to you, so that the same Spirit who raised Christ Jesus' body from the dead will also raise your mortal body from the dead in the resurrection of the dead. That's the hope that Paul's giving. That's the Gospel that Paul is preaching to the Romans. That's really the heart of the hope that he brings to these people. It's the hope for the resurrection of the body.

Now, you might be thinking, "Okay, Dr. Pitre, it sounds like...I think I get it...but it might be sounding like you're making a stretch here. I mean, isn't Paul a dualist? I thought he was saying that the soul was good and the body was bad—that's what

he means by flesh and spirit.” No, that’s not what he means. For Paul as a Jew, the body and the soul are good. God creates the human being a unity, and He creates him good. In Genesis 2, He creates Adam and Eve, man and woman, and He makes them not just good, but very good. The problem is that the first man and the first woman bring sin into the world, and the world enters into a fallen state. And Paul refers to that fallen state as the realm of the flesh. It’s the realm of sin and the realm of death.

If you have any doubts that that’s what he means by it, let me give you a parallel from another one of his letters that will make it really clear. In Galatians 5:19-25, Paul contrasts not just the Spirit and the flesh but the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. And you’ll see a lot more clearly what he means by this if you look at this in context. So listen to what he says:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication...

—the Greek word there is *porneia*, we get pornography from that word—

...impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:19-25)

Alright, do you see what Paul is doing there? When he talks about the works of the flesh, he doesn’t just mean “works of the body.” He means any sinful activity, any sin that we can commit in this life—whether it’s explicitly bodily like fornication or impurity, or whether it’s interior like jealousy or anger or envy. So “the flesh” there is just a reference to fallen human nature, to the fallen human world and the sphere in which we live in this fallen world. So works of the flesh are works of evil, works of sin and death. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, all those—are the works that those who belong to Christ Jesus

perform through the power of the Spirit. He calls it “walking by the Spirit.” It’s the image of walking along a path led by the Holy Spirit, led by the Spirit of Christ. And you can see there that when he says the flesh, he doesn’t mean just the body, because he says:

...those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires. (Galatians 5:24)

Now, does that mean that every disciple of Jesus has literally crucified their body? No, he’s not talking about actual crucifixion. He’s talking about putting to death the disordered desires that are part of our human nature in its fallen state. That’s what he means by “works of the flesh.” In other words, mortifying our sinful tendencies and refusing to give in to those sinful tendencies and instead bearing the fruit of the Spirit through the power of the Spirit of Christ.

Just an example there to help you see what Paul means and what he doesn’t mean by flesh and spirit. When he speaks about flesh and spirit, he doesn’t mean your body and your soul. He means the old creation and the new creation. He means the realm of sin and death, and he means the realm of life and light in Christ.

Okay, in closing then, how does the living tradition interpret this text? I just want to point out here that St. John Chrysostom, who I’ve mentioned before, not just a great Church Father from the late 4th century but also a Doctor of the Church. And his commentary on Romans has this to say...you don’t have to take my word for it, listen to St. John Chrysostom:

“So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Rom 8:11) What then? Are we, it will be said, to cut our bodies in pieces to please God, and to make our escape from the flesh? And would you have us be homicides, and so lead us to virtue? *You see what inconsistencies are gendered by taking the words literally. For by “the flesh” in this passage, he does not mean the body, or the essence of the body, but that life which is fleshly and worldly, and uses self-indulgence and extravagance to the full...*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 13; trans. NPNF1 11:434-35



So pause there. Notice, what is Chrysostom saying? The flesh refers to fleshly and worldly existence, not to the body. And by the way, St. John Chrysostom is reading Paul in the original Greek. He's a native Greek speaker, so he understands how Paul is using these Greek terms. That's in his *Homilies on Romans* number 13. If you keep going just a little bit further, Chrysostom says also:

Again, [Paul] touches the point of the Resurrection, since this was the most encouraging hope to the hearer... Suffer not thy body then to live in this world, that it may live then! Make it die, that it die not. For if it keep living, it will not live: but if it die, then shall it live. And this is the case with resurrection in general. *For it must die first and be buried, and then become immortal. But this has been done in the Font.*

What does that mean? The font of Baptism.

It has therefore had first its crucifixion and burial, and then been raised.<sup>3</sup>

So what's John Chrysostom saying there? That through the sacrament, the mystery of Baptism, we've already died and risen with Christ. We've already died with Him—invisibly, mystically—and we've risen with Him through the waters of Baptism to become members of the new creation.

In other words, our Baptism itself is the pledge and hope of our bodily resurrection, which is really what we're preparing for. Many of the people coming to church during Lent are catechumens who are preparing to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. What is that sacrament? At its heart, it is being crucified with Jesus so that we might rise with Him on the last day. It's a co-crucifixion and co-resurrection. It's the pledge of the life of the world to come...and that is why Paul can say to all of the baptized, "You are not in the flesh, but you are in the Spirit. So walk by the Spirit of Christ."

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<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 13; trans. NPNF1 11:436