



# REVERENCING AND RESTORATION: Caring for Earth

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## Reflections on Lenten Readings for Cycle A

A Project of the Southeast Portland Vicariate for the 2005 Lenten Season

### INTRODUCTION

In a collaborative effort with the staff of the Catholic Institute of Education in South Africa, we offer this resource as a compliment to the inserts prepared on the theme of Caring for Creation and Catholic Social Justice values.

This reflection guide contains separate reflections on the scripture readings for each of the five Sundays of Lent. Each reflection includes questions for reflection or discussion. The reflections focus on the issue of environmental justice. We are in a critical moment as the human family on planet Earth, and we need to reflect on how we relate in thought, word and deed to the Creation of which we are an integral part. We need a change of heart in order to realize deeply that "the fundamental relation between humanity and nature is one of caring for creation."<sup>1</sup> That this is a key perspective of Christian faith is pointed out by Pope John Paul II: "Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith."<sup>2</sup>

### FIRST SUNDAY ♦ February 13, 2005 ♦ Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7, Psalm 51, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

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Fashioned of dust, we belong to Earth; breathed with God's life, we have a destiny buried deep in the Heart of Mystery. We began in the garden of innocence; we have tasted the fruit of the tree; we journey in joy and suffering towards the garden of glory built up of our graced experience.

We do not journey alone. In solidarity with Christ, we carry the burden that will be lifted up. All human beings, all beings, the whole Universe groan in labor pains [Rom 8:22]. But where there is the death of enduring labor pains, there is also hope: we look forward to the birth of the child, the "new heaven and the new earth" [Rev 21:1].

Matthew reminds us that the journey is a struggle and a time of testing to sort the worthless from what is of enduring value. Always searching for the quick and easy answer leads to our loss of freedom. We have become enslaved in many ways to technology, as we try to turn stones into bread, and throw ourselves down from dizzy heights in defiance of nature. We even do not stop short at bowing down to worship our own creations.

For our journey to the garden of glory to be successful, we need to develop a new attitude, and a new praxis. The Psalmist prays, and so should we, for 'a pure heart', always well-intended; 'a steadfast spirit', willing to persevere through the pains of labor; 'a spirit of fervor', able to ignite hope and energy in others with whom we walk.

- *In what ways do I affirm or negate my solidarity with the rest of creation?*
- *In what ways do creatures other than human beings lighten the burden I carry from day to day?*
- *In what ways does technology enhance my freedom; in what ways does it enslave me?*

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<sup>1</sup> US Catholic Bishops.1991. *Renewing the Earth*

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II.1990. *Peace With God The Creator, Peace With All Of Creation: Message for the World Day of Peace.*

The readings last week presented us with a picture of the world we received from God at the beginning, followed by an abrupt account of the disorder that results from sin. Not even Jesus was exempt from experiencing the consequences of this disorder. We need a way out of the desperate situation the world is in and a way forward to its pristine integrity. The first reading this week invites us to set out on the journey that leads to reintegration and wholeness.

The call of Abram invites us to enter into the mystery of our lives. We are asked to turn our backs on the securities on which we have come to rely and to take the risk of venturing into unfamiliar territory. The route and the conditions of the road are not disclosed; even the destination rests only on a promise. Predictably, we will meet with situations that are seldom of our own making and over which we have no control. At such times, we need to have faith in the one who invites us and a willingness to respond positively to the guidance provided along the way.

On the human front, the social terrain is changing dramatically. Social institutions that formerly gave a measure of stability – including the Church – have been under pressure to re-form in order to respond to the challenges posed by modern times. God has entrusted this part of the human journey to the present generation but each person is asked to become involved as an agent of change within the circumstances of their own lives.

Christ pledges to be with us on all the stages of the journey and he makes his empowering and sustaining presence a visible reality in the celebration of the Eucharist. This presence is always instructive through the reading of the scriptures. From time to time, we catch glimpses of his divinity [Mt 17:1-8] – perhaps in prayer, or in a healing experience, or in dangers averted, or in an unexpected positive turn of events. These give us the assurance that we are on the right road. But, in making the journey, we need one another's support [2Tim 1:8-10]. Psalm 32 enjoins us to put our hope in God.

- *The apostles were given a privileged vision of Christ. Our own encounters with him are usually less dramatic. Can you recall an occasion on which you became deeply aware of his presence?*
- *Can you identify circumstances in your life that indicate the 'shape' that your journey of faith may be taking? What risks are involved? Are you willing to take them? Why/why not?*
- *In the world, a meeting with the powerful often induces fear. Jesus appears here in power, but tells his disciples not to be afraid. Why is this? What does Jesus' way tell us about the right use of power?*
- *Power is widely misused in modern times. Identify some instances from your own experience. In what ways would it be possible for you to counter this tendency - with regard to the environment, for example? How could you resist economic practices that contribute to the poverty and powerlessness of so many people?*

Water features in three readings and is an important image in the fourth. It is a distinguishing feature of our planet earth, and essential to life. It represents the new life of baptism offered to us in and with Christ, and refers to the cleansing action of the Holy Spirit. It represents the availability of spiritual refreshment to us. Yet just as we need to look after our spiritual well-being, so we need to look after our sources of water.

In the first reading, the people of Israel have moved into the harsh terrain of the desert of Zin, still some way from Horeb or Sinai. Liberation from Pharaoh's house is hard – there is no easy walk to freedom. Of course, they, like we often do, grumbled: 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt? ... Was it so that I should die of thirst, my children too,

and my cattle?' And yet, the Exodus narratives counter this murmuring with reference to how Yahweh does provide: manna, water, even – albeit later – a 'constitution' – basic needs for individual and communal life.

The Psalm enjoins people of God, such as Israel, such as ourselves, to 'praise Yahweh joyfully', to acclaim the 'Rock of our safety' and to come into God's presence 'with thanksgiving'. God is our maker, 'we are the people he pastures, the flock that he guides'. Although Israel is now a settled nation (like us?), we, like Israel, can recall the Exodus, and a nomadic resonance can be found in the way God guides us to pasturage. The link with the first reading and God's sustaining action is clear. But, as with many Psalms, there is a twist, also related to the first reading: the voice of Yahweh, reminds the hearer of Meribah and Massah – places of trial and contention – and the unreliability of those who are called 'people of God'.

The gospel places a thirsty Jesus, between Judea and Galilee, in Samaria, at a well. Wells mark the route of seasonal nomadic migrations for pasture, determine the paths of travel and trade, become markers on pilgrimages, are claimed by faith tradition – this one is named for Jacob. Wells bring people together. They provide village households, particularly through the work of women, with water. They are sites of hospitality – where strangers ought not to be denied access to water. But wells are vulnerable – the water table may drop and the well be left dry; human waste may contaminate the water supply; an animal may fall in, drown, and poison the water as it decays; enemies may poison the well; one party may seek to deny another access to water...

The readings culminate positively. The Gospel attests that Jesus offers living water to us – Jews, Samaritans, Christians alike. If we drink of this, then, as Paul seeks to convince us, 'by faith we are judged righteous and at peace with God'; that our hope is 'not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us'.

- *'Is Yahweh with us, or not?' What signs orient our search for an answer to this question?*
- *In what ways looking back can we see where our ancestors, elders, or our governments engaged in life sustaining actions that benefit communities? Have we built wells? Can we describe our parish or homes as being like wells? What do we do with the 'love of God' that has been poured into our hearts?*
- *Have we thought about the water resources our neighbourhoods depend on? How is this water supply managed? Is it being looked after? Is the water we use secured by depriving others of water? Do the poor have access? Think of regional conflict situations. What role does the control of resources like water play in conflicts such as those in Israel / Palestine or Darfur in the Sudan?*
- *Jesus, in the dialogue with the woman, calls Jews and Samaritans beyond their own particular traditions. Are you in a place of conflict? How might you be able to hear what your opponents have to say? How can you – together – find a way beyond this situation of conflict?*

**FOURTH SUNDAY** ♦ March 6, 2005 ♦ 1Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

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The readings focus our attention of the theme of darkness and light in all its many forms. The Gospel tells the story of the blind man who has his sight restored by Jesus. After listening to this story, we may be tempted to ask ourselves: 'Who really is blind in this story? The man who was cured, or the arrogant authorities who refused to see or hear the truth?'

In Samuel, we learn that the truth is not always as it appears and that God's ways are not ours. As persons we tend to judge by appearances, but the truth is seen in the light of God's wisdom. Jesse presented his seven sons to Samuel to choose one as king. But God wanted the youngest son, David, a shepherd, to be anointed as king.

In the second reading, Paul reminds us that, though we were once in darkness, we now live in the light and that the effects of this are that we are to live lives of goodness, right living, and truth. The Psalm assures us that God is with us to guide us along the right path even in the midst of the darkness of sin, evil, and uncertainty.

We are called to live in the light of truth and to allow new insights, often gifts of the Spirit, to enlighten our own beliefs and ideas so that we come into right relationship with people, events and all of creation. Scientific discoveries and new theological insights are bringing us to acknowledge new truths. We and all of creation are interdependent and interconnected. What happens to one affects us all. As one author has written: 'The pain we experience in the face of human suffering is a sure sign of our interdependence.' Do we experience this same pain in the face of environmental destruction caused by human activity?

- *What new insights about creation have affected my relationships with people and with the environment?*
- *What are the challenges to my way of living that come as a result of these new insights? How do I lessen the impact of my life style on planet earth?*
- *Am I open to the surprises of God in my life? A God who sees things differently than I do?*

**FIFTH SUNDAY** ♦ March 13, 2005 ♦ Ezekiel 37: 12-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:8-11, John 11: 1-45

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Ezekiel informs us that the Lord God will transform our present lives and renew our hearts and minds. He will give us a new heart and a new spirit so that we can know him better, and believe in him more deeply. This is because, as the second reading stresses, 'people who are interested only in unspiritual things can never be pleasing to God'. Nor will such people find God pleasing, and open themselves to the new heart and new spirit which he promises. We need to die with Lazarus, and be born anew by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can truly be incorporated into Christ.

In the gospel Lazarus becomes a key symbol of the power and meaning of Christ as the Resurrection and the Life. The people who gathered in Bethany to comfort Martha and Mary are like any normal community when death has affected one of their members. They come together to mourn and, at the same time, to celebrate the life of the deceased. It is during such a time that our faith is most sorely tested. Mary and Martha believed that their brother would have not died if Jesus had been around. They stood firm in the belief that the death of their brother has happened for a purpose known to God. When Lazarus came out from the tomb, many who did not believe in Jesus found faith in him. The whole community had a new experience of Jesus, seeing him with the eyes of faith.

Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It is a time for us to become reconciled with God. If our faith is tested let us invite, in prayer, the one who raised Lazarus from the tomb to give us strength and courage to continue being effective witnesses wherever we are.

- *Look at the environment. As the seasons come and go, the vegetation experiences significant changes - life, death, rebirth. Why are these changes important to plants?*
- *Are these changes a nuisance to us, so that we devise means to short circuit nature's cycle and produce every kind of fruit in and out of season? Is this a sign of greed - or intemperance? What will such an attitude produce in us in the long term?*
- *When we suffer drought, extreme heat or cold, floods or other natural disasters, how might the symbol of Lazarus become a source of strength to endure?*
- *Have you experienced death in your family? How were you helped by your community to cope with the situation? Did you experience personal growth during the period of mourning?*