

# Homily for the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed November 2, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Wisdom 3:1–9; Psalm 130; John 5:24–27*

Today’s short gospel lesson is part of a larger story. It’s early in John’s gospel, the beginning of chapter 5, “Jesus’ Healing Work on a Sabbath.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus is in Jerusalem for a feast. He walks by a pool whose waters are believed to be healing if one were placed in the pool when the water has been stirred up. Raymond Brown wondered if it were fed by an intermittent spring.<sup>2</sup> Jesus focuses on an invalid and asks him, “Do you want to be healed?”<sup>3</sup> He never makes it to the water. Jesus’ next words to him are, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.”<sup>4</sup>

The narrative continues with this information: “Now that day was the sabbath.”<sup>5</sup> The man who was healed is confronted by”—to quote the anti-Semitic language of this gospel—“the Jews.” His offense was carrying his pallet on the sabbath. When asked why he was

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 166.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), 207.

<sup>3</sup> John 5:6.

<sup>4</sup> John 5:8.

<sup>5</sup> John 5:9.

doing this, he replied, “The man who healed me said to me, ‘Take up your pallet, and walk.’”<sup>6</sup> When Jesus seeks him out, he learns who healed him. Jesus warns him not to sin. As the man goes away, he stops to tell the Jews that it was Jesus.

The evangelist writes, “And this was why the Jews persecuted [and prosecuted]<sup>7</sup> Jesus, because he did this on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working still, and I also am working.’”<sup>8</sup> The evangelist explains, “This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God.”<sup>9</sup>

John Ashton was a lecturer in New Testament at Oxford University. In his book *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, he wrote, “The debates between Jesus and the ‘Jews’ . . . reflect the pain of the Johannine and synagogue communities toward the end of the first century, ‘the type of family row in which the

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<sup>6</sup> John 5:11.

<sup>7</sup> Moloney, 169–70.

<sup>8</sup> John 5:16–17.

<sup>9</sup> John 5:18.

participants face one another across the room of a house which all have shared and called home”<sup>10</sup>

Francis Moloney, an Australian Roman Catholic scholar and Salesian priest, comments on this chapter are helpful for me and relevant to our Eucharist today. Life does not stop for humankind on the sabbath. Children are born; people die; life goes on. Moloney writes, “It was clear to Jewish thinkers that God could not rest on the sabbath . . . But this prerogative of God could not be usurped by any creature.”<sup>11</sup>

The Jews are angry because they see Jesus as a human who has told a man to pick up his pallet and walk. He calls God his Father, one who works on the sabbath. Jesus claims God’s mission as his mission.

The Son speaks about life and judgment. He says that those who hear and believe have already passed from death to eternal life—not judgment, but eternal life. And then he says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the

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<sup>10</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), 151—cited in Moloney, 168.

<sup>11</sup> Moloney, 170.

voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”<sup>12</sup>

These words are not about the future. Raymond Brown points out that Jesus’ words here cover the “spiritually dead . . . and “the physically dead are not forgotten.”<sup>13</sup> The Word made Flesh is creating in the flesh a new relationship between the Creator and humankind. What matters is for John’s community is believing in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.

During the Easter Season, we use Eucharistic Prayer D. It’s based on the fourth-century Liturgy of Basil the Great. Marion Hatchett, in his commentary on our 1979 Prayer Book, notes that a form of this prayer is used in Greek and Slavic churches. A Roman Catholic version was prepared and included in the Missal of Paul VI. There are ecumenical Protestant forms. Hatchett concludes his comments by noting, “Like Eastern and Roman eucharistic prayers since the fourth century it provides for intercessions.”<sup>14</sup> One of these petitions can be in our hearts today, “Remember all who have died in the peace of Christ, and those

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<sup>12</sup> John 5:25.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, I:215.

<sup>14</sup> Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 378.

whose faith is known to you alone; bring them into the place of eternal joy and light.”<sup>15</sup> I think that in light of John, we should have a generous understanding of God’s desire to show love and mercy far beyond our experience and understanding.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 375.