

5th SUNDAY OF LENT – *Passiontide Begins*
29th March 2020
Rev Marian Bond

READINGS

Ezekial 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

THE COLLECT

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

SERMON

It must have been in the 1960's that a father and son paid a visit to a church deep in the Derbyshire countryside. The father was a church architect who became my father-in-law. He was visiting a church in need of repairs and he brought his son along with him. The church was dedicated to St Lawrence and the name of the village was Eyam. You'll have heard of Eyam. It is the village where the plague arrived in a bundle of cloth back in 1665 and where the vicar led the villagers in their decision not to have any contact with people from other places until the plague had gone. Food was left for them on the borders of the parish. 273 villagers died but no one else outside the village caught it.

Back in 1665, people were no less afraid of death than we are. Or were they? Did they not have more faith in those days? Did they not believe that the hand of God was in everything, that the experience of sickness was always an opportunity for spiritual growth?

Our reading from Ezekiel is the very one that inspired the spiritual song, “Dem dry bones.” The prophet, Ezekiel, described the hand of the Lord coming upon him so that the Spirit of the Lord seemed to lead him to the “Valley of Dry Bones”. The vision led him to realise how desperate the people were. They lamented that their bones were dried up, that their hope was lost and that they were cut off completely. Don't those sentiments resonate with us? And when God tells Ezekiel that He will bring the people “back to the land”, it may seem to us that it could be like God telling us that he will sort this whole thing out. Back in the plague-ridden 14th century, Julian of Norwich had a vision of God speaking to her. She wrote, *He did not say, “You shall never have a rough passage, you shall never be over-strained, you will never feel dis-eased”, but he did say, ‘You will never be overcome.’*”

It is to a great extent a question of attitude, as St Paul tells the Christians of Rome. If we continue living our lives without God, we are likely to feel overwhelmed by the whole situation. If we call to mind that, as followers of Christ, we have His Spirit dwelling within us, we shall find that we do in fact have faith and that we are able to show compassion for our fellow human beings. The message is that we are able to receive and share this gift of the Holy Spirit now; we do not have to wait for this new life until we die.

As Christians, we certainly recognise those words taken from our gospel reading, “I am the resurrection and the life.” The resurrection is not just a concept, not just a process. It is in fact a person. It is Jesus, Jesus, the Son of God, who is to be raised from the dead by the Spirit of God. Jesus, the Son of God, is shown here as being so very human. Jesus' love for the little family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, is portrayed vividly. When he wept for his dead friend, the people couldn't but exclaim, “See how He loved him”. The feeling was mutual. Both sisters, separately, say the same thing, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”. What heartfelt faith in Jesus. What palpable grief for their brother.

It is understandable that this story should be set as the gospel reading for this Passion Sunday, just two weeks before Easter. In a way, the raising of Lazarus from the dead prefigures Jesus' own resurrection, although it is not the same. Let us compare what John says about the head band in both accounts. Here, John writes, *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him and let him go.’* John 11,v44.

John's description of the first Easter day runs as follows: *Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went to the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.* John 20,vv6-7

The resurrection of Lazarus is quite different for he still needs to be unbound. Jesus, on the other hand, no longer needs unbinding for He has passed from death to life. Jesus raised Lazarus because He loved him. John 3.16 shows us that God sent Jesus to die for us and to rise again for us because He loves us. The question for us now is how can we show our love for others.

Earlier in that story Jesus' disciples tried to dissuade Him from making a journey that would threaten his life. Jesus took no notice but resolutely continued on His way, knowing that the action He was about to perform would enable people to believe that He was indeed sent by His heavenly Father. We, just now, have been dissuaded from making physical journeys that could threaten not just our lives but the lives of thousands of people. And we have no option but to stay home. That does not mean that we are prevented from continuing our Christian journey in a spiritual way.

Maybe, we are not so different from those folk in 1665 who believed fervently that events surrounding sickness presented them with an opportunity for spiritual growth. Maybe this self-isolation, trying as it is, has become an opportunity for our own spiritual growth. This poem by Kitty O'Meara, which you may well have come across recently, describes it so well.

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Amen

A HYMN : Dear Lord and Father of mankind

By John Greenleaf Whittier

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper rev'ence, praise,
in deeper rev'ence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
beside the Syrian sea,
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee,
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!
Interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace,
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!
O still, small voice of calm!