

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year A - 2/4/2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

When we began Lent, some five weeks ago now, we used the familiar words, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. This called to mind the Genesis account of God creating Adam from the dust. The phrase quite rightly reminds us of our mortality, of our fragile nature. It recalls our origins, and seeks to remind us that we are, at the end of it all, just the same as each other - no better or worse than those around us. We are made of the same stuff.

Today’s readings return us to our roots again. They remind us of our mortality. But they also give us hope - the hope of life that God can bring through the Spirit. I can’t help but think that here, as we continue this long Lenten journey, we are being given a hint of what is to come - what lies at the end of the way - the promise of new life.

In Ezekiel we find the first hint. For we hear the wonderful story of how the dry bones in the desert were given life by God, and how breath was restored to them. This passage has been seen by some theologians as an Old Testament reference to resurrection. One of the early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote in his treatise, "On the Soul and the Resurrection":

One might ... select many passages of Holy Scripture to establish the doctrine of the Resurrection. For instance, Ezekiel leaps in the spirit of prophesy over all the intervening time, within its vast duration; he stands, by his power of foresight, in the actual moment of the Resurrection, and, as if he had really gazed on what is still to come, brings it in his description before our eyes.

And then, we come to the story of the raising of Lazarus. Fittingly, two weeks before Easter, Jesus comes to within two miles of Jerusalem, to the town of Bethany, where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha live. This narrative, so familiar to many of us, reminds us that Jesus, in life as in death, turned death into life. His ministry was about touching the untouchables and giving them life - the lepers, the tax collectors, the woman caught in adultery. Most shocking of all, he touched dead bodies and made them live again.

It is important, I think, to realise that this story with which many of us are so familiar is not simply a nice feel-good story. It is set within a swirling controversy between Jesus and “the Jews”, which has clearly reached a stage where his disciples implore Jesus not to return to where people seek to kill him. There are continuing overtones of the themes of light and Glory, of literalist understandings of Jesus’ words, and of astonishing declarations of faith. So much of the symbolism within John’s Gospel is present in this story. If we read it within the context of Jesus’ journey to the cross, then we begin to see the wider scope of the Gospel message.

And when we hear Jesus command “Unbind him, and let him go”, we need to understand that this is a command to us also; for us to recognise that which binds us in our lives; those habits which keep us dead to the possibility of new life in Christ, to living life as we were made to, life as was given to us in our baptism. For this is also a strongly baptismal image - that of dying to sin and rising to new life - the grave clothes in which Lazarus is wrapped can limit us also.

The story of the dry bones coming to life in Ezekiel, the bringing back to life of Lazarus, the resurrection of Christ, point to the most distinctive thing that Christianity brings to our world today: the belief that God is a God of life and flourishing, not of death and decay. God always wants us to come to fullness of life, to be wholly who we are called to be.

One of my favourite images of the raising of Lazarus was painted by the Sieneese painter, Duccio, in 1311. It portrays, among other things, Mary and Martha in their grief, a fabulous image of a disciple holding his nose, to protect from the stench as Lazarus emerges, and poor Lazarus himself, looking completely bewildered, still bound tight like a mummy in his grave clothes at the entrance to the tomb.

And what strikes me most about Lazarus is that Duccio has portrayed him almost as if he is blinking into the light, reluctant to leave the warm comfort of the tomb. The brilliance of Duccio's image is that being given new life in Christ is like that. It is not necessarily easy. It is often much simpler to stay in the comfort of a life half-lived; the comfortable job, the easy prejudices of our childhood, the routine which sees our gifts unused, the resentments carefully nursed; the relationships and friendships that limit us.

We are just like Duccio's Lazarus, tentatively stepping into a brave new world, unsure as to how our illusions are about to be shattered. For new life in Christ entails becoming the people whom God calls us to be, becoming fully our selves, breaking out of the bandages which cripple and stifle us. New life in Christ entails this not selfishly but in such a way that we expect and encourage that new life in our fellow travellers too, remembering that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. We have to let go of the comfort of our dearly held but mistaken beliefs to see the hand of God in our lives and in the lives of all of those around us.

New life bursts out when the former slave-trader rejoices to see white and black existing equally together; new life is promised when we overcome our jealousies and resentments to speak to family members whom we have ignored for years; new life is ventured when we take those first tentative steps towards finding a job which really uses all of our God-given gifts; new life emerges when the misogynist sees that women have equal capacities and gifts as men; new life flourishes when we welcome the refugee and the homeless person with respect.

New life is what the Christian path is all about. New life is given to us over and over again as we turn to Christ. It is never refused us. We simply have to grasp it with both hands. May we, with Lazarus, emerge into new life this coming Eastertide, accompanied by the God who loves each one of us more than we can possibly imagine.

In the name of God. Amen