

29.3.20 C.H.S. Sermon: Suffering does not have the last word.

The Ezekiel passage, the Gospel story, the Psalm and the Epistle, remind us and future generations that God not only gives life, but restores life – that death will not have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken away.

All the readings begin with a dark period then move to a different conclusion – inspiring life, and starting afresh, looking ahead to the events of Holy Week and Easter.

Whether it's the dry bones taking on life; the Psalmist praising God, who will redeem Israel; Lazarus being raised from the dead; or the journey outlined in Romans, from flesh to spirit.

George Burns is quoted as saying – “Where the world places a period, God introduces a comma.” – Suffering does not have the last word.

I want us first of all to focus on our Old Testament passage from Ezekiel 37:1-14...

Ezekiel is thought to have lived after the fall of Jerusalem, around 593-563 BC.

The people of Israel were in exile, living with some limited freedoms, but on the whole, their existence has to be seen against a background of disaster and a crisis of faith; the Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors, and had been banished. The Temple had been destroyed; the holy city sacked; and the soul of the people of Israel had withered on the vine. They recognise their plight at v.11: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

On Friday night, I went out for a run by the Mekong. It was an almost surreal experience. I didn't leave the house until 9pm because I wanted to wait until the temperature dropped a little but I was also conscious of how busy it can get there in the evening, particularly as this was a Friday.

But when I reached the place normally busy with the night market, there was only darkness and silence. I ran for a little over two hours and in all that time I only saw a few handfuls of people, mostly young people. It was like running through a ghost city, something from a post apocalyptic world, you might see in a movie. With so few people around the city seemed so dark and desolate and lifeless.

And of course we know this desolation and lifelessness, isn't just being felt in Vientiane, it's now people's shared experience across much of the world, isn't it?

Likewise, Ezekiel's story is one of a valley of dry bones. If you can imagine it, it would be like something out of an Indiana Jones film – struggling through to a hidden valley, covered with bones and skulls lying in chaos, almost as far as the eye can see. Or, alternatively, a more contemporary metaphor might be a Zombie movie!

The curiosity of looking out on a landscape full of dry bones, in hot, arid, sunshine, in eerie silence, doesn't exactly inspire the listener to imagine new possibilities: the vision that things may turn out differently, and, as we wrestle with what may be a familiar story, we look for new learnings, and wonder about dryness and exile in our own lives. We wonder about our own Valley of Dry Bones: what on earth's happening with this Covid19 virus? How bad is it going to get? Are our loved ones going to be safe? How is the world going to be different from now on? Where is God in all this?

Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest, so even though the bones are stripped, and completely dried out, the reader has to remember all the ritual prohibitions of being near death. A whole range of ritual prohibitions existed to prevent priests going near human corpses, so his even being in this valley was no small feat. He was certainly outside his comfort zone, just as most of us are right now.

The story begins in silence, with Ezekiel being led to this valley, and then becomes a word event. It is in response to God's words through Ezekiel that the bones take on flesh and life; it is in response to Ezekiel's words that the bones rattle, that bodies begin to breathe, and noise, beyond the dialogue of Ezekiel and the Lord, occurs.

God says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" and Ezekiel responds – recognising God's place – saying, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know".

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

Notice that very end part. Why is the Lord giving these dry bones life? They're being given life from death so they'll know him to be their Lord.

Despite how unpromising the desolation around him, Ezekiel does as he's told...

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Flesh and blood life is nothing without connection to God, as the next part of our story makes clear.

“Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”

The last verses are about God’s prophecy to the people of Israel; about the great return, eventually, from exile. God explains that these bones are the whole house of Israel, and the prophecy is made that the people will return to Israel: ““I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.” (v.14).

God is wanting his people to respond to his invitation, the life giving prophecy of Ezekiel, so that they will return to Him and be restored to the land he promised them.

Likewise I wonder what God is saying to us today, in our own situation? Isn’t the message to us the same? In the midst of this Covid19 global pandemic, aren’t these words an encouragement to us, to proclaim God’s life giving Word in response to his call upon us. To show by our thoughts, words and actions, the life of the Spirit of God at work in us, so that we too are a mighty army in the service of God’s Kingdom.

Moving on to consider our Gospel passage, from John 11:1-45...

Jesus tells the people around the grave to unbind the grave wrappings from Lazarus, and to let him go. What is it that we can learn, from Ezekiel’s prophesying, and what is Jesus calling us to do, as we recognise his true identity? There is a calling out of God’s people to be different; to do something unusual and different; and to live differently. How can we proclaim the power of His reign... or to quote part of Mary Oliver’s poem, *The Summer Day*:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do With your one wild and precious life?”

Ezekiel, Psalm 130, and the Gospel passage are all passages which ask us to be patient, and yet are passages which challenge us. How do we cope with waiting; with leaving space for God, with being expectant, even when there are little or no signs of God? Do we trust in the promises that God will forgive; that God’s steadfast love lasts forever? Waiting is particularly hard for us in this time of Lent... can we journey alongside Jesus, can we stay awake?

When have we felt as though we were wading through a valley of dry bones, or like the Psalmist shouting to God from the depths? How has God been present, or not present in those times... is our personal spiritual life dry, or abundant, or somewhere in between? What do we learn, and how do we grow out of, and from, the difficult and hard paths we sometimes find ourselves walking along, like just now in the midst of the current global crisis? How do we unbind ourselves, removing the grave clothes of self-doubt, isolation, and marginalisation?

Who does God speak to us through; how do we discern God's voice and know God's love? Yes, we know the Sunday School answers, that we hear God's voice through prayer that listens as well as speaks and through thoughtfully reading the Bible. But what are the words we need to hear for our lives today, and how do we open ourselves to the living breath of God's Spirit, and the one who proclaims "I am the resurrection and the life"? How do we break out of complacency and tired routines, to do a new thing, God is calling us to?

In preparing for today, I came across this excellent quotation from the author C.S. Lewis:

"We must stop regarding unpleasant or unexpected things as interruptions of real life. The truth is that interruptions are real life." Covid19 isn't simply a horrible interruption of real life, it is real life. This doesn't necessarily mean God is punishing the world but it is real and we do have to deal with it, not alone but in accordance with the will and resources of our Sovereign God.

As I mentioned earlier, we need to look beyond the realm of the flesh and seek that vital connection God has given us through a new relationship made possible by His Son's victory on the cross over all that separates us from Him. We have access to the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, something spoken of in Ezekiel but only fully realised on the Day of Pentecost.

So we turn to our epistle, Romans 8:6-11...

These short verses talk about life in the Spirit, as opposed to life in the flesh, and are typical of Paul setting different ideas in opposition to each other.

The recipients of this letter are a minority, in the capital of the Roman Empire; they wouldn't have been living in palaces or villas, they'd have been living in the poorest areas of the city. Life wouldn't have been easy for them there, even before the great persecution of the Christians by Emperor Nero and others.

Against that background, these verses are a wonderful affirmation of, and pointer to, life. Saint Paul is pointing us to an eternal power, that's available to us as believers, whatever our place in time and space.

Life in the spirit is not about an ethereal other-worldliness, but is about how we live our lives as physical incarnate bodies. It challenges us about how we use our energy; how we shop; how we care for God's earth; and how we care for our neighbours.

When the Spirit lives in us, our lives become expressions of God's grace; when we live in the flesh, our lives deny God's sustaining grace, and suggest that we are lords of our own lives, with no need to take heed of others. Flesh, if you like, is shorthand for a worldly life lived in service of our own needs and desires, rather than the life-giving Spirit which we have through Jesus.

Paul offers the choice – living within the rigid bounds of empire, or exodus and liberation, as God's people.

That's a choice we face today.

I want to close by sharing something my mother sent me yesterday...

It's also attributed to C.S. Lewis. In it, he's describing an imaginary conversation between Satan and Jesus. It was written in 1942, in the midst of the Second World War.

It begins with Satan saying: "I will cause anxiety, fear and panic. I will shut down business, schools, places of worship, and sports events. I will cause economic turmoil."

To which, Jesus replies: "I will bring together neighbours, restore the family unit, I will bring back dinner to the kitchen table. I will help people slow down their lives and appreciate what really matters. I will teach my children to rely on me and not the world. I will teach my children to trust me and not their money and material resources."

How will we get through the current crisis and any other crises?

""Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" says the Lord Almighty."

Amen.