

“Words On The Word”

Reading the Readings with Revd Stephen Froggatt

Sunday 29th March 2020

Lectionary Passages for Year A Lent 5:

Old Testament: Ezekiel 37.1-14

Psalm: Psalm 130

Epistle: Romans 8.6-11

Gospel: John 11.1-45

Passiontide

The year was 2003. Mel Gibson’s brutal film “The Passion Of The Christ” had been released on Ash Wednesday. Those who watched, even between the fingers of hands held up to the face in horror, were able to witness the graphic violence of Jesus’ arrest, trial, scourging and crucifixion. Some considered it “sick” or “unnecessary”. Many tried to ban the film. The controversy surrounding its release of course simply served only to increase its demand.

Eventually the Pope was asked to see it. Pope John Paul II sat through it all, and then responded afterwards with the words “It is as it was”.

Passiontide, which begins today, is the season of the Church year in which we are invited to confront afresh the horror of Jesus’ final twelve hours on earth. It is a choice few are willing to take. We tend to prefer our Jesus as the clean smiling baby in the manger, or the gentle teacher of children on the hillside. We may concede to an angry table-turning in the temple courtyard, but on the whole, the Jesus we picture is generally child-friendly. We struggle to contemplate the physical abuse Jesus suffered at his trial, the

scourging which would have left him close to death on its own, and then the bleak and naked crucifixion which would have brought not just torture but humiliation too.

“Passion” means “Suffering” rather than “love” but of course as we move towards the final weeks of Lent we do so with the full understanding that Jesus went to the Cross because he knew it was the only way. His love for the Father, and his willingness to obey the Father’s will even to death on the cross, demonstrated Jesus’ love for all of us he came to save.

John 15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

As we look at our readings together today, let us keep them all in the context of our Lenten journey, the Passion of the Christ, as we head inexorably towards the death and resurrection of Jesus.

LENT 5

Ezekiel 37.1-14 The Valley Of Dry Bones

Ezekiel's vision of the bones in the valley must have left him absolutely shaken to the core. This desert of skeletons first gets re-fleshed into an army of the dead, but then the "four winds" of God's breath enter into them and they become alive again.

Is this the first account of a resurrection in the Bible?

Or would these soldiers have died again when they became old?

Ezekiel's words of prophecy bring life where there was none before. Of course, prophecy is less about 'telling the future' and more about bringing God's word into the current context. A prophet's job is to say to ordinary people "This is what God is saying to you, in your situation, right now".

What is your prophetic role as a Christian today?

What is God saying to us all in the midst of CoVid-19?

How can God use us to speak prophetic words of peace?

This story offers a deep insight into Ezekiel's understanding of God. The vision was a parable about the Exile, and Ezekiel is given understanding about God's faithfulness through the horror of that experience. Ezekiel can bring a message of hope to God's people enduring the anguish of being in exile (the metaphor of death in the final verses) so that they can be assured that God is indeed still with them, and that they will return "and come to Zion with singing" as they find life afresh with God's breath (= Spirit in Hebrew) bringing them life in all its fulness again.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that as Christians today we are currently "in exile" but that God is still faithful, as God was to the exiled Israelites. How does that suggestion sound to you?

What hope does this passage bring into that?

Psalm 130

De Profundis

The “Songs of Ascents” were the singing-as-you-go psalms sung by God’s people as they made their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the festivals. Whichever way you approach Jerusalem, there are some serious hills to climb, so what better than to approach the Holy Hill with some hill-climbing songs - the Hymns of Ascents. The collection of 15 Psalms (Pss 120-134) formed an internalised hymn books as they would all have been sung from memory.

Origen and Augustine, two of the Early Church Fathers, also saw within them a sense of the soul mystically ascending to God in prayer. That works too, especially in this psalm. “De profundis” - “Out of the depths” - this is surely how every prayer must be made.

Whatever our situation, and to whatever depths we feel we may have sunk, there is always hope. God is not waiting for us to pull ourselves out of the depths and then to offer our prayer, but to pray FROM the depths themselves.

Taking this week’s theme of suffering, what hope does this Psalm offer?

TEXT STUDY - read through the Psalm. How many different attributes of God (qualities, characteristics) can you find?

The theme of “waiting” for the Lord is not about the Psalmist waiting for God to do something - rather it is like the eager anticipation of a trusting child, full of joy and longing. God’s done it before, and God’s going to do it again.

What stories of God at work in your life can you tell?

This Psalm incidentally features in a film starring Bruce Willis (10 points if you can name the film!) where Willis’s character rather unbelievably manages to translate successfully “De profundis clamor ad te Domine” using just a Latin dictionary which he finds conveniently at home. The ‘De Profundis’ Psalm is also the title of moving and powerful work by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, which features low basses intoning mysteriously at the very depths of their vocal range - do check that out if you can.

Romans 8.6-11

God's Spirit is Life

Can you be dead while you are still alive? Paul says you can. Sure, your body can be functioning well, it may even be in tip-top condition; your job may be going well, the bills may be getting paid, the children may be doing well at school - yet if your mind is set only "on the flesh" - that is on the things of this world - then you are dead as far as Paul is concerned.

This short passage reads effectively as a commentary on the passage from Ezekiel, which of course is one reason why it is set as a parallel Lectionary passage today. There is a long argument running through Romans about the difference between "life in the flesh" and "life in the Spirit" - to the former belong sin and death; to the latter belong forgiveness and life.

For Paul, "life in the Spirit" means nothing more and nothing less than the Spirit of God dwelling in you. And THAT is why this is a reading in the run-up to Easter:

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.

Who do you know who clearly lives life "in the Spirit"?

Who looks to you, perhaps unknown to you, in the same way?

John 11.1-45

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

Can these bones live? Lord, only you know!

Hear the word of the Lord: Lazarus, come out!

From the nameless army in Ezekiel's vision we come to the single named person in this account in John's Gospel. Lazarus of Bethany, undoubtedly one of Jesus' close friends with his sisters Mary and Martha (of whom much can also be written of course), causes Jesus to weep in one of the most famously short verses in the Bible. (There are, in fact, shorter verses - 10 points for naming them!) The fact that Jesus weeps at all is evidence of Jesus' humanity and love.

Some commentators have suggested that the three friends ran a leper colony in Bethany - perhaps an early form of what we would today call a hospice. It is likely that Mary's wealth (she clearly had a large home) came from benefactors for the work of their community - for example the expensive perfume she is said to have used in John 12.

Why does John include this episode in his Gospel? Lazarus is only mentioned in John (it's a different Lazarus in Luke 16) so this tells us that John's account is not intended to point to Lazarus but to Jesus. It's a Jesus story, not a Lazarus story. Since this episode occurs before the major turning point in John's Gospel (Chapter 13) it also means that it is a SIGN (miracle) telling us something about who Jesus is.

Lazarus was brought BACK to life, rather than resurrected. Jesus uses the opportunity to reveal his most profound "I AM" - when he declares "I am the resurrection and the life". Jesus is Lord, over both the living and the dead.

The suffering is real. People live and die. People weep. People grieve. Jesus is all and in all, and that includes being present in our suffering and weeping with us. However, let's not stop with "Jesus wept" but move on to "I am the resurrection and the life".

How does the Gospel unbind those who are dead in the world to free them to new life in Christ?

Readings for Today

Old Testament

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, "Prophecy 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, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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 prophecy, 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.

Ezekiel 37:1–14 (NRSV)

Psalm

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Psalm 130:1–8 (NRSV)

Epistle

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.

Romans 8:6–11 (NRSV)

Gospel

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.

John 11:1–45 (NRSV)