

E – Sermon, 5th Sunday in Lent, 29.3.20

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11: 1-27

1. Introduction

Today's readings are very dramatic: Ezekiel has a very trippy vision about dry bones collecting together and reanimating to form people; John, the resurrection of Lazarus and Paul writing about life in the Spirit. I want to start by thinking about the situation of Lazarus. His name is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew *Eleazar*. Take out the vowels in typical Near Eastern style and you will get the similarity (L-z-r). In Hebrew it means 'God is my helper' which in itself is a good message for the current times we are living in. God will help us each moment of the day in order to take us to where He wants us. His plan is not halted by Covid-19.

2. Bethany

John relates to us a miracle that happened a little before Jesus' own death and resurrection. It is only recorded in this Gospel as the other three confine themselves to what Jesus did in Galilee where he lived most as we have seen before (in my last sermon, 23.2.20). John's Gospel also tells us what happened at Jerusalem. Is this because when the other Gospels were written, Lazarus was still alive and it would not have been prudent to perhaps endanger him physically (or his humility) to have the event recorded, until John got around to writing his Gospel many years later? Interesting thoughts. John also records this miracle in great detail compared to others in his writing.

Another interesting aspect of this account is to note how the word 'love' is used. In verse 3, Mary and Martha's message to Jesus uses the Greek word *philos* meaning 'close intimacy' of the sort among family members. In verse 5 we are told that Jesus 'loved' Martha, Mary and Lazarus using the word *agape*. This is the key word for Christian 'love' – selfless love looking for no reward which our faith should be famous for and of which Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13. Some commentators have speculated, reasonably, that Lazarus might have been 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in the rest of the Gospel due to this event. The said disciple is never mentioned by name and only *after* the raising of Lazarus. Again, interesting.

3. Those who walk during the day do not stumble

This then is the final sign of Jesus and points most clearly to what has been at the heart of the revelation all the way through his ministry – the Way of the Cross leading to new life. Jesus spells this out, for those who have ears to hear, in his teaching that 'I AM the resurrection (and the life)' (v25) – He gives His life and in doing so gives life to all of us – the divine mystery/irony. This account also continues to develop the theme of faith and God's response at his own appropriate time. Jesus clearly had a special relationship with Lazarus and his sisters and just as with his mother Mary, at the wedding of Cana, responds to their requests in a way that may seem strange to us now as it did to them all that time ago.

Jesus demonstrates that God's time is not our time. It is impossible for us to determine the divine moment when God's power will explode into our lives. Our time is not God's time. In all that Jesus does we see the glory of God in His love and life-giving power. This is the heart of the Gospel. We are called to have faith just as Martha and Mary had in their Lord. Nothing has changed in this respect and we should remember that in these challenging times

4. Dead Inside?

How often do we feel the pressures of life and resign ourselves to that which is less than what God intended for us? Everybody, at times, can feel over-burdened and even 'dead' inside. There is a space in everybody where negativity and darkness have their kingdom – it is part of being human. The Good News is that God will break into these places as well. There is nowhere that is able to keep out his loving and healing presence. The tomb that is inside all of us, where we all retreat to or are forced inside due to persecution or illness, is still a place not absent from God. His resurrection power is there.

This is what Paul explains about when he writes about life in the Spirit. It is through this approach to life that we gain life and peace. It is the same Greek word, *zoe*, used in the Gospel reading and Romans meaning 'spiritual life'. We are no longer dead, in the usual sense of the word, but ready for transformation on a daily basis – into that person that God wants us to be. This is a healing process, to be 'saved' is to be 'healed'. In our healing, the glory of God is made manifest in exactly the same way that it was in the raising of Lazarus.

If we were dead inside for any reason, we are now 'alive' because we are 'in the Spirit'. Think about that – 'the Spirit of God dwells in you' (v9), the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead (v11) which means that the Spirit 'will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you' (v11). In this way Gods timing that we thought of earlier is NOW. He is present with you now. Each minute, each second. What are you going to do with this time? God's gift to you of his eternal presence.

5. Conclusion

The key to engaging this truth in Romans is our minds (v5-6), the place of our thoughts, our motives and our subsequent actions. We have to practice focusing our minds on things of the Spirit. This means setting aside time for prayer and meditation. Many of us have found ourselves with more of this (time) recently due to the Lockdown. Every cloud has a silver lining, if you find yourself with a lot more time on your hands, then treat it as a gift. Our rooms, our houses are the new location for participating in God's plan for all of us to persevere in the process of transformation into people who love their neighbours and so into the real body of Christ.

In His name, Amen.