

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, 10th April 2011 – ‘Can These Bones Live?’
Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8: 6-11, John 11: 1-45

By way of information, or possibly warning, I need to tell you that this today is part one of a three part sermon, although to be fair part two was actually written by someone else, and we'll get to that next week, and then the final part will come in two week's time, which is of course Easter Day. So, you have been warned!

Today draws us close to the end of Lent and with our readings offer us a preface of sorts to what's to come, and much like the themes of Holy Week they boil down to life and death, or perhaps more accurately, death and life, and the distinction is important. Our tendency, I think is to focus on life, and that's appropriate, and certainly in line with what Jesus said. We're in John for one more week, then we take a break, and John is full of life: "I am the resurrection and the life." We hear those words this morning. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," words from the previous chapter, which we'll return to in a few weeks. Life is, without doubt, at the heart of the gospel story, but it's important that we remember that so is death; not life after death, but death itself. Death is certainly at the heart of what we've heard this morning.

I was tempted to focus mainly on Lazarus today, partly because it really is such a significant story in the Gospel account – in John it's this event that really tips the scales against Jesus. He's in danger already; the reading makes that clear, especially with Thomas's wonderful declaration when Jesus decides to go back to Judea, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" – one of my favourite bits in the Bible. Here though, immediately after the raising of Lazarus, the Jewish authorities begin to plot to have Jesus killed. In the other three gospels it's the cleansing of the Temple that sets them off, but in John it's Lazarus. So I was very tempted to stick with Lazarus today, especially as you had to endure all forty-five verses, but in the end Ezekiel won me over.

I've mentioned once or twice before that Ezekiel isn't my favourite book in the Bible. I once spent a whole semester studying Ezekiel and it wasn't a pleasant experience, mostly because Ezekiel can be a particular unpleasant book, with some truly disturbing imagery and ideas and some of the most insane-sounding rants you'll find anywhere. I actually left that course with the distinct impression that Ezekiel was a bit of a nutter, and not the funny, eccentric kind, more the dangerous 'lock him up and throw away the key' kind.

I still think Ezekiel is a bit of a nutter, but I now have a better idea of why that is, and that 'why' is essential background to what we've heard this morning. The Valley of Dry Bones is one of the more upbeat parts of an often downbeat book. It's a story of resurrection and renewal, but the crucial point comes near the beginning when God shows Ezekiel the valley and asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" and I don't know about you, but I can almost hear the hesitation before Ezekiel responds, "O Lord GOD, you know."

"O LORD GOD, you know." We might hear the story of the Valley of Dry Bones and be so caught up in the glorious hope of resurrection we find there that we forget to ask what should surely be our first question; where did all these bones come from?

I suspect a large part of why Ezekiel is such an unpleasant book is because it comes out of truly horrendous events. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel is a book of exile. It begins nearly 600 years before Christ when the Babylonian army invades Jerusalem after a two year siege which brought famine and disease and worse, and a whole bunch of survivors are sent to Babylon, including a young Ezekiel who finds himself in a strange land being shoulder-tapped by God to become a prophet. While he's there he hears horror stories of awful things happening in the Temple and the people being led astray and then his wife dies and God orders him not to grieve for her because he must be an example of strength for the other exiles, and so we begin to see why maybe he started to go a little nuts.

Ten years pass and things go from bad to worse. Those left in Jerusalem decide to fight back and the Babylonians retaliate by destroying the city, including the Temple, killing thousands and sending many more into exile. So when God takes Ezekiel to a valley full of skeletons he knows, these are the bones of those who have died. It's quite possible, in fact, that such valleys actually existed, just as they still do in some places following some horrors, today. More than just a literal valley of bones, though, for Ezekiel and those others forced from their home, banished to a strange land, without hope or meaning, these bones represent everything they have loved and lost.

Exile for the Israelites was about much more than just being forced to leave their homes. Israel found its identity, then and now, in its land. For those taken to Babylon the exile was a crisis of both physical suffering and communal identity, but even more it was a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Israel – Jerusalem, the Temple, and the monarchy based on the line of David – all were gone. For a people who believed that these things were given to them by God, this meant one of two things: either their God had abandoned them, or their God was dead. Either way, the only response was despair, and it's from the depths of that despair that this vision arises. So when God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" The obvious answer is 'no' but Ezekiel has been working for God long enough to not go for the obvious answer, so instead opts for 'maybe'.

The rest of the vision unfolds, with God telling Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and he does, and he watches as sinew appears and flesh and skin, but still they did not live because "there was no breath in them."

This word 'breath' is central to this episode in the original Hebrew. Throughout the story we find the word '*ruach*' which in Hebrew can mean wind or breath or spirit. In Ezekiel 37 all three meanings are suggested, but none more graphic than the instant where God, in almost a replaying of the creation story in Genesis 2, breathes life into the now-no-longer-dry bones, "and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." And then God explains the vision. It is a story of resurrection and recreation and promise and life, but it takes on its true meaning because it sits within the context of death.

Sometimes we need to take death more seriously. There is a real danger sometimes that we see the promise of new life, but ignore the death that precedes it. That's a problem because I can stand here and I can promise you new life, I can speak about resurrection and re-creation, and I can spout on about all that, but we don't always live in the land of resurrection. Much as we may celebrate and long for Easter, we all spend some time in

Lent, and each of us from time to time finds ourselves standing in a valley of dry bones, and the same is true for everyone around us.

We do live, as I sometimes like to say, as Easter people. The Gospel each and every one of us is called to share is good news; the kingdom of God has come near, new life is at hand, not just when we die, but here and now. That's what Martha didn't understand when Jesus said "Your brother will rise again." 'Yeah, sure,' she says, 'I know on the last day he'll rise from the grave,' and Jesus says, 'No.' "I am the resurrection and the life." In me there is life both beyond and before the grave. That's the good news we receive and that which we're called to pass on, but let's be honest and acknowledge that it's not likely to mean much to those in the depths of despair.

There are times when, like Ezekiel, we look around and all we see are bones. Can these bones live? It's not likely. There are times when far from wanting to thank God, and be good, happy Christians, we just want to yell like Martha does; where were you? "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Where is this God of new life when everything seems so dead?

We all have our bone-filled valleys. One of the things that I remember starkly from my trip to San Francisco last year was visiting the city of Oakland and walking down streets of closed up businesses – valleys of death. I've spent time in prisons and welfare centres where you can taste the desperation in the air. We need to take those places seriously. It's not enough just to say 'better days are coming'. In two weeks time we'll be right here singing alleluias and proclaiming Christ is alive, but we only get to Easter through the cross; we only hear alleluia after Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Why aren't you here when I need you most?

If we really want to prepare for Easter, if we really want to fully embrace what Easter means, if we really want to understand what this promise of new life might mean, we need to spend some time focused on what precedes it. To fully experience life, we need to allow ourselves to experience death.