

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, April 2, 2017

Rev. Andrew Reid

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-3, 17-45

“...that they may live...”

Lent. 40 days. 40 days of preparing for Good Friday and Easter Day and the good news of resurrection and new life. 40 days of training, anticipation, penitence, self-examination. 40 days of self-discipline, self-denial, restraint.

And on the fifth Sunday in Lent, in the depths of this season of penitence and restraint, our Old Testament lesson is the story of Ezekiel's vision of life returning to the dry bones. And our Gospel lesson is the story of Lazarus returning to life. There is nothing restrained or penitential about these stories. They may start out sad, even bleak, but very soon they explode into life, bursting with energy and vitality and vigour.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones starts out as truly the stuff of nightmares. It seems almost as if the prophet has stumbled into the horrific scene of some bloody massacre. Bodies lie stripped bare of flesh, sinews and skin by wild animals. Bones are scattered around, lying bleached and dry in the baking heat of the sun.

The scene in Bethany may be less nightmarish, but it is still heart-wrenching. And part of what makes it heart-wrenching is Jesus' failure – it may be more accurate to call it his refusal – to do anything. He had been told that his friend Lazarus was ill, but he had not come right away. Instead, he had waited two whole days before he set out. And if we assume that St John's account is chronologically accurate, it must have taken him a few days more to travel from the other side of the Jordan, where he had just been. Either way, St John says that by the time Jesus got to Bethany, Lazarus had died, his funeral had taken place, and his body had been in the grave for four days.

In spite of that, and only after some interaction between Jesus, Mary, Martha and the other people gathered there, Jesus raises Lazarus from his grave and restores him to his family.

On the one hand, the story reveals something important about Jesus' humanity. We are presented with the picture of him weeping over the death of a friend.

On the other hand, it reveals something important about his power over life and death, and points to what we know will follow soon – his own resurrection.

The power of resurrection and new life, brought together uniquely, directly, powerfully, in the person of Jesus Christ. And Lazarus lives again.

The story of the valley of dry bones ends with a different kind of resurrection. There the bodies that return to life remain unidentified, nameless, anonymous. And because they remain unidentified, nameless, anonymous, the story remains quite impersonal. That is because the story of the dry bones is not about the resurrection of an individual in the way that the story of Lazarus is. Though of course, that's not all that the story of Lazarus is about.

The concept of the resurrection of the individual was quite foreign to Hebrew and Jewish thinking right up to the advent of the Pharisees, who do seem to have believed in resurrection. Apart from them, any concept of living on was in the context either of the people, the nation as a whole, living on, or of families living on in the lives of children and children's children.

Ezekiel's vision was about the return to life of the people, the city, the Temple, the land. His vision dates from round about the time when, in 586 BC, the empire of Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar conquered

much of the Middle Eastern world, including Israel. Jerusalem was laid waste, and worst of all for the Hebrew people, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Psalm 137 is their song of lament from those days:

By the rivers of Babylon

there we sat down

and there we wept when we remembered Zion . . .

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

The message of Ezekiel's vision was that God would breathe life again into the community, the nation, the whole people of Israel. His message was the message of hope that even in the midst of defeat and despair and the apparent destruction of everything that made the people of God who and what they were, God remained a God of power, of faithfulness, or redemption. God had not abandoned and would not abandon God's people.

The message that Jesus proclaimed when he brought Lazarus to life, is made clear for all to hear and understand in the words that he spoke to Martha. His words lie at the heart of our faith not as Lent people, but as Easter people. I read these words loud and clear at the graveside whenever I conduct a funeral. Jesus said, *'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'* John 11:25-26.

For us who are people of faith in the risen Christ, who look back on the story of Lazarus through the lens of the resurrection, the story of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of the story of Holy Week, especially of the story of Good Friday and Easter Day. For us who are people of faith in the risen Christ, who look back on everything that Jesus said and did through the lens of the resurrection, it simply cannot be any other way.

But I suggest to you that the stories of Lazarus and of Ezekiel's vision, are equally foreshadowings of what God can still do in the lives of the people of God – in your life, and in my life, and in our life as a community

of faith.

In the place where there is death, the word of God can bring life. In the place where there is despair, the word of God can bring hope. In the place where there is sadness, the word of God can bring joy. In the place where there is turmoil, the word of God can bring peace.

So let me ask you this: what is God doing in your life? What word of peace is God speaking where there is turmoil in your life? What word of joy is God speaking where there is sadness in your life? What word of hope is God speaking where there is despair in your life? What word of life is God speaking where there is death in your life?

Listen for the word of God in your life and give thanks.