LENT V – MARCH 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

When I started to prepare this sermon, the world was turning normally, we were gathering, meeting, going about our lives as usual. And then, “in the twinkling of an eye”, our world was turned upside down. We were isolated, stranded in foreign parts, uncertain what was happening and powerless to do anything much about it. It strikes me that this situation is an invitation to look more deeply into the stories of Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones with his uncertainty about what could possibly happen to them and of Lazarus’ family faced with the death of the only man in the family, leaving two women alone and unprotected in a patriarchal society. So, let us look at these two scriptures with different eyes and ears today.

Who was Lazarus of Bethany? His name means “God helps” or “One whom God helps” – totally appropriate in this case, I think.

Brother of Martha and Mary, clearly a friend of Jesus along with his sisters. Curiously, although we hear of both Martha and Mary in other places in the gospels, the only time we hear of Lazarus is when he is raised from the dead by Jesus. Here is someone who has been dead for FOUR DAYS. And that is important to remember, because popular belief at the time was that a dead person’s soul remained in the vicinity for three days, then left. So, by all counts, after four days had passed, Lazarus was well and truly DEAD.

Why do we only hear this story from John? It may be that the three writers of the synoptic gospels did not wish to tell the story during the lifetime of any of that family, because Lazarus in particular was seen as a threat to the enemies of Christianity, the (literally) living proof of the power of God in Christ. Indeed, there is a tradition that he may have been subsequently murdered by fanatics. According to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, after the resurrection of Jesus he escaped to Cyprus and was made a bishop there.

We are told that some of the witnesses to Lazarus’ return to life went and told the Pharisees and chief priests, and that this miracle of Jesus was the final straw for these authorities who from then on looked for reasons to eliminate him.

Bethany was perhaps the one place where Jesus felt “safe”, at home, could relax and take a little time out. He had been out of town when Lazarus died, probably keeping a low profile because his enemies were after him. What, I wonder, were his own thoughts as he lived through this? Does he feel guilty because he was not there to heal Lazarus’ illness sooner? Not likely, since he hung back another two days after getting the message. He also states clearly that this is all to show the Glory of God, so he knows what he will have to do. Does he also know, somehow, that what he is about to do for Lazarus is in fact in effect the seal on his own death warrant? Does this explain his distress, which in some translations is described as anger? Or is it a combination of sorrow, shared grief and perhaps some inward fear or awe at what he is about to do? It’s frankly anybody’s guess, but all these are possible.

I wonder, has anyone read the novel “The Last Temptation of Christ”? One of the theories mentioned in that book is that Lazarus was brought back to life, but that he always bore the marks of the four days’ decay of his body to remind us of the relative importance of this life as compared to everlasting life with God. One does wonder with what eyes Lazarus looked on the world he had been wrenched out of and then drawn back into by the healing power of God in Jesus.

Lazarus represents a case of resurrection and restoration after a purely physical death, but the story in Ezekiel is one of resurrection and restoration after a spiritual death brought on by hardship and suffering and exile.

Ezekiel was a prophet to the dispossessed people of Israel, a despairing people who were spiritually dead, who had lost any hope of ever regaining their homeland. God shows Ezekiel the valley of dry bones and declares it to be the people of Israel. By stages, God requires Ezekiel to declare the words of God that will bring back these people.

The first stage, no less an obstacle than the stone across the opening of Lazarus’ cave tomb, was that the bones were scattered; this can represent our spiritual confusion, the fragmentation of what we believe.

Ezekiel prophesies the Word of God and the bones come together, which is a step in the right direction, just like Jesus’ prayer, but they are still bones, just as Lazarus was still a body in a tomb. In us, that is like beginning to get some handle on what we believe, and returning to the roots of our faith.

Ezekiel gives more of the Word of God and the bones are covered with flesh, sinews and skin, but we aren’t quite there yet, any more than Lazarus coming out of the tomb was quite there yet. We aren’t quite there yet either, we are on the way to full restoration as people of God, followers of Christ, but we still need the Holy Spirit to come into us.

The final prophesy of Ezekiel is to the wind to come from the four corners of the earth to breathe life into these bones – that is their freedom and restoration, just as Lazarus was fully freed and restored when the grave clothes were removed.

In the Ezekiel story, God asks the prophet a terribly loaded question: Can these bones live? And Ezekiel does not know, and frankly says so, “O Lord God, you know”. God knows, sure, but he isn’t about to restore them alone, just like that, he calls on Ezekiel to prophesy, first to the bones then to the wind for their breath.

There is a saying of the great Saint Augustine which we would do well to remember in this and other contexts.

The saint said:

Without God, we cannot.

Without us, God will not.

Jesus called Lazarus to new life, God called the dry bones of Israel to new life. How does Jesus call us out of our dead, painful or difficult places into restoration, healing and new life? Our daily lives include some small deaths: loss of a job, damage or loss of a relationship, forced to move house, being unable to acquire something we need: where might we find the healing touch of Jesus in these situations?

I think the answer lies simply in acknowledging that “without God we cannot” and through prayer and willingness to change what may need to be changed, we can move through these desert places. With God, all things are possible, but without us, without our cooperation if you will, God will not.

It certainly feels right now as if we are living in that Valley of Dry Bones, unsure of where this is all leading us and where it will end. But we are a people of faith, and by keeping faith and following instructions from the powers that be, we will come through this and be the stronger for the testing time.