

Shirley Parish

Readings and Sermon for Passion Sunday – 29th March

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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 round 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, prophesy, 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 prophesy, 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.'

John 11:1-45

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 for 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 for 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 upwards 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.

Collect for Passion Sunday

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Or

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sermon (from Rev Paul Day)

There's a phrase which is known as the Chinese curse (even though historically it has no connection with China) – and the phrase is *may you live in interesting times*.

And these certainly are interesting times.

I suppose that none of us would have chosen to live in times like these – but then we don't have the choice. Here we are and we have to respond to the situation as best we can. And how we do so will show the depth of our faith and our character.

Abraham Lincoln once said before he became president :

It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: "And this, too, shall pass away." How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!

Those words are, I think, important words to have in mind as we seek to live through this mess and confusion; as we struggle to reconcile the desire to see our loved ones with the knowledge that we can't; as we worry about relatives, neighbours and friends and about ourselves and what the future holds; as we stare at the newspapers and the television screens wishing things were different but knowing they are not.

This too shall pass away.

But although those words state an undeniable truth, and although those words might bring some kind of small comfort, they also contain more than a hint of fatalism. What will be will be. All we can do is sit here and wait. There is nothing we can do to alter things or make them any better.

But our Old Testament and Gospel readings today present a very different picture.

They both lay out before us scenes of hopelessness. A valley of dry bones – where there is no life, no hope and no future. The sealed tomb of a loved one – where there is no life, no hope and no future.

But as the stories unfold, they each show the power of God – in the one through the words of the prophet and in the other through the actions of Jesus – the power of God to bring life where there is none, to bring hope where it is lacking and to point to a future that can be enjoyed.

So what about where we are in these “interesting times”?
Is there hope?
Is there a future?
And what kind of future will it be?

And perhaps more important – is there anything we can do to bring these things about?

In the story from Ezekiel the Lord says to the prophet – “Mortal man, can these bones live?”
His response is one that we might well give – “O Lord, you know” – words that are as appropriate now as then. The Lord knows what we are going through and knows what the future is.

In the story the Lord responds by telling Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. To speak God’s word into the lifelessness and the hopelessness. To bring the power and the presence of God into the situation. To demonstrate the love and concern of God. To show that he has not forgotten his people nor forsaken his people.

We may think that we are not prophets, that we are not Ezekiels or Isaiahs. We may think that if there are prophets today they are probably priests or bishops but not ordinary folk like us. But if, as we have just been thinking, prophecy is speaking the word of God into a situation then I believe we can all be prophets – and particularly in “interesting times” like these.

We can speak God’s word into the situation not just by what we say but also by what we do and who we are. The way we react to things; the way we handle uncertainty and confusion.

We can speak God’s word by keeping in touch with those we know – and perhaps by making new contacts with those we don’t yet know. Using the phone or perhaps online chat methods.

We can speak God’s word by praying for those who are ill, those who are fearful, those who are lonely, those in the emergency services, those who seek to keep calm while serving us in Sainsburys .. and the list goes on and on.

We can speak God’s word as we take practical steps to help those around us if we are able; to keep an eye open for those who vulnerable or unable to get out.

And perhaps most of all we can speak God’s word by staying hopeful when all around are losing hope; by living out the faith that we have – the faith in the God who will bring us through this uncertainty.

The story of Ezekiel is a very visual picture of God bringing life out of lifelessness through what Ezekiel said in faith. The story of the raising of Lazarus is a very visual picture of hope rising from despair through what Jesus said and did in faith. In the uncertainty and strangeness of this pandemic can we paint a picture for the world to see of a God who is here alongside us in the uncertainty, a God who gives us cause to hope where there seems to be none and a God who will bring us into a new future where we might sometimes think there is none.

Prayer from Archbishops for use at this time

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy.
Sustain and support the anxious,
be with those who care for the sick,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may find comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

And something to remember. The church is not the building but the people – wherever we are.

WHERE THE CHURCH IS



