

Sermon Sunday 29th March Fifth Sunday of Lent
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Available to watch on our Youtube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9SOC8mqnQo>

Ezekiel 37:1-4 and John 11:1-45
Dry bones and Lazarus.

Father, we thank you and praise you for your promise of life, even when everything looks dead. May your Word bring us new life today. Amen.

Good morning. Well! What a week it has been! Everybody's life is disrupted, all of us are finding ourselves having to contend with new challenges – not least the isolation, the loss of our normal routines, and any sense of structure to our lives. And of course, just on Friday, we learned of the death of our dear friend Audrey. It's heartbreaking not to be able to give her the funeral and send-off we all feel we should be giving her. Audrey was for so many years a real stalwart of Christ Church, and she has welcomed many a newcomer into our congregation. She served faithfully virtually all her life. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

So now, welcome to our new look sermon! I confess to being a complete amateur at this, so please don't expect professional filming! This is a new experience for me. It's weird not being able to see you all. And as I was thinking about it, I realised that I am at a distinct disadvantage here: whereas I usually have you as a 'captive' audience in church, now I am at your mercy: you can just switch the off button whenever you like!

Be that as it may, here we have two quite remarkable Bible passages, and I'm sure most of you will be familiar with them, Ezekiel and the dry bones, and Jesus raising Lazarus. In each

case, the background picture is one of sorrow and danger. Ezekiel has witnessed the fall of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah; his people have been scattered; hope seems dead. Jesus on the other hand has upset the Jewish authorities – you may have noted in the reading that the disciples tell him not to go back anywhere near Jerusalem because the authorities are out to kill him. There is a sense of menace in the air, there is fear.

And all that makes these readings pretty relevant to us and the situation in which we find ourselves. There is certainly a lot of fear around, there is the threat of this virus hanging over all of us, and in other places there has already been so much death and despair.

But in these words I think we find the source of the hope we need, the hope on which God wants us to build our lives.

Ezekiel the prophet has tried so hard. He has prophesied to his people faithfully, over and over, telling them where they have gone wrong, urging them to repent and to return to God. But the people ignored him, and now disaster has struck. But God never gives up. Into the depths of Ezekiel's despair, God speaks and gives him this amazing vision of dead, dry bones being given new life. The remnants of the past are knit together in a new way; God breathes his Spirit into them and new life happens.

However bleak the situation may appear, God will fulfil his promise: he will restore his people; he will take away their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh; he will fill them with a new spirit. He will be their God and they will be his people.

The dead faith of the Israelites will be rekindled and new life will follow, like dry bones being put back together and the body filled with life-giving breath or spirit. God is showing Ezekiel that there is hope for a better future, for transformation.

And then in John's Gospel we have another situation of despair and pain. Lazarus has died. With both Mary and Martha you can't help but hear a note of reproach in their first words to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Where were you, Lord, when we needed you? How could you let this happen? Why didn't you come straightaway? Why did you let him die?

And then, you can almost hear Martha take a deep breath and let her faith come to the fore as she says, 'But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'

In the depths of her sorrow, Martha allows her faith to help her. That is the pattern we see so often in the Psalms. First comes the lament, the outpouring of pain or anger of despair, and then – the declaration of faith, the act of will: "But I will yet trust in the Lord." It can be hard to trust, especially when we feel low and things look desperate. But how often does God tell us in the Bible 'Do not be afraid'? I've been told it's 365 times, once for every day of the year.

And Martha's faith and trust are proved to be well founded. Lazarus is raised and restored to his family.

But there is much more to this episode than the amazing miracle of Lazarus' new life, as if that weren't enough!

Jesus is using this act to show his disciples, to show us, what is to come. Jesus is showing that *he* has the *power* to bring new life where all we can see is death and decay.

Jesus is showing that the power of love is greater even than the power of death. Everyone who meets with him, each one of us who embraces the new life of the Spirit, each of us has started to live in life eternal.

This doesn't just mean 'going on forever', rather it means life in all its fullness, life as God intended us to live it, a life filled with the love and the power of God dwelling in our hearts.

Lazarus' body will die again, but the real Lazarus will never die; everyone who acknowledges the power of Jesus Christ to raise them from the death of sin, will never die, for Christ is the Resurrection and the Life.

Whatever our situation, however dried up or dead inside we might feel, Jesus is the Lord of Life and he can give us new life, his risen life inside us. Some of you may have used the Night Prayer I recorded this week, from the New Zealand Prayer Book, which ends with the words: 'The divine Spirit dwells in us. Thanks be to God.'

So let's remember this: the divine Spirit that showed Ezekiel how God could restore his people even when everything looked to be over, finished, lost; the divine Spirit by which Jesus restored Lazarus to life; the divine Spirit which raised Jesus himself from death; that same Spirit *dwells in us*. Let your heart be his home, a room lovingly prepared, giving him a warm welcome, a place where he will delight to come and rest and work. Do not be afraid. Have faith in him, and then the energy which is in him will come alive in you, and the work which he does, you will do. You are doing it already in your care for one

another and for your neighbours, keeping in contact, offering help.

As we say in that beautiful and famous prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred, let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

And where there is sadness, joy

O Divine Master, grant that I may

Not so much seek to be consoled as to console

To be understood, as to understand

To be loved, as to love

For it is in giving that we receive

And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life

Amen.