

## **Sunday 22 March – Fifth Sunday of Lent**

### **Sermon by Liz Barnes**

*An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

In the name of the Living God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Throughout Lent we have been invited to journey with Jesus and witness key moments in his teaching and healing ministry. As our journey draws near to Easter, we hear one of the most imaginatively dramatic readings in all Scripture: Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. This vision reminds every generation that God not only gives life but restores life, that death will not have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken away.

Fundamentally both our reading from Ezekiel and our reading from John's Gospel are about life and hope. But first they are about bones and death.

Ezekiel was a prophet of the Babylonian Exile, Judah and Jerusalem stripped to the bone. A lot of pain and regret and no small measure of anger, anger directed at the Lord and anyone who would presume to speak a word from the Lord. Then we have Mary, Lazarus and Martha's house in Bethany which was the last stop on the way to Jerusalem, where Jesus' final miracle takes place before a crushing end.

Ezekiel's vision of the 'valley of dry bones' was a picture of return from exile and is almost certainly the best-known passage in Ezekiel's prophecy. Its theme was and is desperately serious, as current events in Palestine make very clear. For the Jews have always seen the Holy Land as God's gift to them, and to be deprived of it, even for a short time, has never seemed less than a total catastrophe. When therefore the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 597BCE and, in that year and 586 carried most of the inhabitants into exile, the Jewish nation was devastated. Ezekiel expresses their feelings very vividly: 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' In such circumstances, the prophet's message must have seemed too good to be true. For he reported God's promise; 'I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil'

And within fifty years, it happened: Cyrus the Persian allowed the Jews to go home. But the building of a nation filled with new life took a lot longer.

Enemies had to be resisted, the city and the temple rebuilt, the Scriptures written down, and the law collated. And later Jews, like Ezekiel saw God at work in all of it, metaphorically transforming dried bones into living people, raising dead bodies from their graves to new life.

Today's Old Testament reading has two messages, one for now and one for the hereafter.

And as far as the hereafter is concerned it is great to hear the message that this life is not all. Contained within the mystery of life is the message that beyond what we see and hear and touch there is God's heaven, God's many mansions.

We cannot tell what the furniture of heaven is like. Yet those 'mansions', give us an imagery that encourages us to believe that only the best is waiting for us in God's heaven. And it is the transforming power of Christ that enables us to have this tremendous faith. As Lazarus was raised from the dead, and as God's glory is proclaimed, so too, we have the promise and the assurance that, in God's time, his promise to us will come true: that one day we too will be received into his nearer presence, his heaven, where God will 'wipe away all tears and where there will be no more death, grief, crying or pain...' (Revelation 21:1-5)

Death is that event that brings us into a new dawning, a new day, God's day, with all that means. It is of course a very sad day when a loved one dies and it can and does raise all sorts of profound emotions, but it is also a new day for our loved one in God's 'many mansions', his heaven. The promises of God become a reality for them. They are no longer promises but now fact.

For us we can only rejoice in the promise of new life in Christ in God's heaven. But this promise from Jesus 'I am the resurrection and the life' is also about new life now. We don't have to wait to go to heaven to have new life and hope. As Ezekiel asked: 'Who can make these bones live?', receiving the answer that only God can do this; so too that is the answer to our questioning.

In this life, which is deteriorating to an alarming extent, who can pull us up, change the direction of our lives, and set us on a new path? Only God in Christ can. So, it is for us then to hear these challenging words and let them speak to us now. The transforming power of Christ can change us and the

world in which we live, for the better, for God's purposes. In Christ there is the power to forgive and resurrect and restore to new life.

God brought his people back and re-established them in the promised land. As we progress through Lent, perhaps it would be valuable for us to consider what dry bones (and dry times) are represented in our own spiritual lives. What can we learn from the lonely and parched periods of our spiritual journeys? The "dark night of the soul" is familiar in literature and the human experience. Most of us can point to periods of time when doubts, hopelessness, depression, fear, and anxiety were prominent in our daily living. Certainly, hopelessness and despair were a communal experience for the people of Israel at the time of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones. What could we possibly learn from these "dry" periods of life when we feel as disconnected and brittle as the bones in Ezekiel's vision?

Today let each of us be encouraged to breathe deeply, richly, of the life giving, life sustaining Spirit of God. The bare bones of belief can be easily shattered. It is only when faith breathes in and breathes out that it comes to life, in liturgy and worship, in study, in prayer, in service. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you'

Amen