

Lent Five: The Breath of God

At the beginning of Lent we went into the wilderness with great purpose and at the bidding of the spirit. But at some point in most lives we look around and find ourselves in a dry and apparently lifeless place and it does not seem like a purposeful struggle rather it seems like mere survival at best and at worst death merely warmed up. On the fifth Sunday of Lent some of us might be feeling a little weary. And others might feel relatively unscathed by all this struggle and grace.

To engage us in the journey we have three wonderful readings this morning. And I have to confess my favourite is the Ezekiel reading. The stark image of bones lying waste in the dust and the prophet reluctantly prophesying to them, and the macabre clanking of bone on bone as they put on flesh and eventually have life breathed into them. It is the stuff of dreams and visions and boys own adventure tales. It is the ultimate supernatural story, an ancient and great myth, a life giving metaphor of God at work in places and in people that seem beyond hope.

John's account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is more complex but also very exciting. And at heart it too is a story of God's son breathing life in to the dead so that there might be life where there has been death. It is also a prefiguring of Jesus' own journey through death to new life.

And St Paul, in his usual convoluted way, is reminding us that because of our relationship with Jesus the Christ we have the spirit of God dwelling in us now and that we therefore belong to immortal and eternal things. St Paul who is so often quoted as being anti the body is actually a bit more complex than that. When he speaks of the flesh, and living according to the flesh, he means an attitude of life that is focused on the limits of human endeavours (and failure) to live up to the law of Moses which quite simply we all fail at. When he speaks of the Spirit he means the indwelling spirit of the risen Christ which is given us when we are made one with Christ in baptism. It is not the human body versus the disembodied human spirit or psyche. It is about our orientation as people – toward our own endeavours (whether morally good or bad) or toward relationship with God. St Paul does expect that an orientation toward God will result in a life that becomes more and more loving and good but it is the relationship with God that is all important. And we become good and loving because of the presence of the indwelling Spirit of God.

Of all the rich and varied detail in these amazing readings let me concentrate just on three.

In Ezekiel God breathes the breath of life into the people of Israel, even after they are long dead. God restores life to his people at a terrible low point in their history, during the Babalonian exile, and in doing so he speaks to them a hope for all the people. That image of dry bones clothed in life again can speak to us at every level of what makes us dry and desolate. As individuals maybe going through a time of spiritual or social dryness and struggle we can hear

the bones clanking as they rise up to be given flesh again and allow the possibility of new life stir up in us. As spiritual people in an age of youth orientated consumerism we can hear the call to real life. As a struggling little parish past our hey day and arguably past our use by date we can hear the words of Ezekiel speak life onto these dry bones.

If Ezekiel speaks of hope then John describes restoration as a given. Lazarus is raised from the dead not to eternity but to full human daily life. He is restored to life in all its beauty and demands. He is given back to those who love him and who have a claim upon his love. The resurrected Lazarus, unlike the resurrected Jesus, does not wander around for a while in a changed form awaiting ascension, he is restored to who he was and called to be unbound and to get on with it – life. Is this not what we are saved for? Saved from life as we knew it for life as it is! Restored from life to life so that renewed but strangely the same we might live life as it was always intended?

And St Paul's words might remind us that we are to live a life in which our flesh is lit from within by the indwelling of God's spirit or breath.

This is the dance of Lent – death and new life, dryness and new growth, the clatter of bones and the whispering voice of hope.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.