

## LIFE

Nicky Ing - 13th March 2005

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 116:1-9; Romans 8: 6-11; John 11:17-45

The theme of *life* is at the centre of our readings today. In the first reading, that well known passage from the prophet Ezekiel, we see a vision of the restoration of the people of Israel in response to Ezekiel's preaching of God's Word to exiles in Babylon. Though they have been defeated and reduced to dried bones following the exile, God's life-giving spirit will restore the slaughtered armies of Israel and the people will once more enjoy peace and prosperity in their own country...the prophet looks forward to a time when the people will recognise and acknowledge what God has done for them in restoring them to their own land after their exile...that God has after all remained faithful to them, and not abandoned them. The people had lost hope and were feeling disconnected from their relationship with God...When we feel powerless and hopeless, its like a kind of death that sucks life and energy out of us, and causes us to feel despair...does this strike a chord with any of us? This vision of Ezekiel's gives great hope to people who have given up on themselves: and for us, today, it is a promise that God never gives up on us. The image of God calling on the four winds to bring back life into the bones, is a very powerful one...bringing us back to Genesis where we find God breathing life into the man he has made from the dust of the earth... (the second chapter of Genesis...one of the versions of the creation story, which teaches that all life comes from God.)

Then Paul, in his letter to the Romans, talks about this same spirit of God that gives *life*. He explains that the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us and is responsible for giving us life. The flesh, as Paul puts it, stands for all that is weak and fragile in a human being. As humans, we tend to forget, to wander away, and to be selfish ...we see this so often in our relationships and in our lives...the things we intend to do, are often left not completed...we fall, often! We let each other down...we run away from our problems, and we are full of anxieties and fears...But Paul reminds us that we have been given the Holy Spirit, and that we are the children of God. The Spirit helps us to overcome our weakness...both individually and as a community...and as we are in the 5th week of Lent now, it's good for us to remember that God's Spirit is the very source of *our life* as people here at the Church of Ascension. (What kind of life do we express and offer to one another and to the wider community?) Quite a searching question for us to think about...

Then we have the wonderful Gospel story in which John asks us to recognise that Jesus is the *Life* of the world: he is capable of transforming death and decay by restoring life. The story is a foretaste of the glory of Jesus' own resurrection: a demonstration of resurrection power. Jesus reveals this power over life and death given by the Father, when he miraculously restores Lazarus to life. The death of Lazarus has clearly left a terrible gap in the lives of those who loved him...and by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been dead for four days, and Martha expresses her disappointment in Jesus for not coming sooner to help. But Jesus' absence is essential to the story, because it is

through Lazarus' death that God will be glorified....(he reveals his identity as 'the resurrection and the life'). We see too, here, the humanness of Jesus...the emotional side of Jesus...he weeps outside the tomb of Lazarus. We don't know whether his tears were of grief for the death of a friend....or perhaps tears of sympathy for Mary and Martha, or tears of anger, at the evil of death...or perhaps in fear, knowing that his own death would come soon.....and knowing too, of the suffering and humiliation which still lay ahead of him. We just know that Jesus wept. The great miracle in this is that *while he is dead*, Lazarus hears the word of Jesus, and obeys it....and Lazarus comes out from his tomb, still shrouded in his grave clothes...his hands and feet bound...and Jesus now involves the community in continuing the process...he tells them to unbind him, and let him go free. They too, help Lazarus to unwind and move out into the light of his new life.

The Lazarus story proclaims that Jesus is the Lord of all life. He has power to call us out of our so-called tombs...for our life as Christians begins when we hear the word of God and listen, and obey it. We certainly don't have to be physically dead to be in need of being raised up...we can be dead in the midst of our lives, hoping and longing for a word, and for a community of love that will put us together again. We can experience spiritual deadness for many reasons....lack of forgiveness can be a major one...lack of love, lack of commitment, we may be unable to trust one another or to trust God....we may feel guilty, sinful, sad at what we may have lost...or sometimes we can be just exhausted. It was interesting that this week, as I was thinking about these scriptures, the newspaper showed us the picture of the bones of Tutenkamen, the young Egyptian Pharaoh who died in the 14th century BC...and the scientific evidence which seemed to point to the fact that he was not murdered, as had been supposed...of course his death was such a long time ago that it is purely a historical fact without much emotion around it. But then we saw pictures and read about the exhumation of the bones of Jabulani Ndaba, and Oscar Maleka, who were killed in 1988 during the struggle against apartheid. I thought about how the families of those two men had needed some kind of closure in their grief for all these years, not even knowing where their loved ones had been buried....and what a healing experience, hopefully, it will be for them now, to bury the remains with a proper farewell, having been deprived of that for so long. And in the process, how the family of the white policeman, Andre Nel, who also died that day, want to have reconciliation with the Ndaba and Maleka families. For me, there was a parallel to be drawn with the raising of Lazarus...in seeing how, in revealing the truth after so long, healing can happen....healing of the heart....for those three families this has been a time of bringing new life....that is wonderful and we can thank God for it.

So, what are the things in my own life that are causing deadness, rottenness, decay? For all of us, Lent is a good time to be considering these things. Do I just want to leave them as they are? Or do I need Jesus' resurrection power renewed in my life? Perhaps we can talk to Jesus about that today. But are we willing, like Lazarus, to hear and to obey the call, when he tells us to come out from our dark place?....

Jesus calls each one of us away from staying in our dark places in life. He encourages us, too, to take responsibility for one another...and help each other to be free from whatever it is that binds us. So we need to be open to the opportunities that he gives us to be free

ourselves help others towards this kind of freedom. Often these will be in small ways, but they need courage, sometimes, and they can become life-changing for us and for other people. May we draw closer to the risen Christ in these days, close enough to reflect in just a small way, the power of that amazing love which he offers to our struggling world.

**Amen.**