

Sermon 29 March 2020.

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

John 11: 1-45

Dusty bones or Living Flesh?

As we get closer and closer to Good Friday, and the death of Jesus, and as we deal with an uncertain and changing world with the impact of corona virus, we view the world differently than we did only a few short weeks ago.

People are scared and concerned, unsure how to react. The doomsayers are sensing opportunity and raising their voices, seeing in the corona virus impending disaster.

On You-tube a few days ago one person was ranting about the “world collapsing”. The end is nigh, all hope extinguished.

We are living in a time when things are changing quickly, almost daily there are new restrictions, more bad news. Many people are confronting endings. For some it is the very real threat of their own demise, or the death of loved ones, for others the fear of changing circumstances, the end of a way of life. Some fears are real, some exaggerated in the minds of the vulnerable.

Last Sunday, saw our last church service for the next how long??. What does this mean for us?

Do you worry about what happens next, do you see grand plans for the future slipping away? Do you worry about the economy and your financial future? Are you tempted to lose hope, seeing the life we have known changing, ailing until we, personally, or as a congregation are nothing more than dusty bones? Do you see in the suspension of Sunday services as the beginning of the end for our little congregation?

There is no doubt we face challenges, but, through all the doom and gloom there is hope. There is life, life in Christ. Look at today's readings from Ezekiel and John and take hope in the power and faithfulness of the living God who promises life to those that believe and have faith. If you see doom and gloom, I say take heart, God does not desert us, God assures us of life, but we must be prepared to embrace it and play our part in it.

Ezekiel's visions are graphic and stark, even macabre. A valley of dry, dusty bones, nothing living, death rampant, hope extinguished. This is the nation of Israel, God's people in death and decay. Then through the power of God, flesh, muscle appearing, growing on bone, skin clothing the bodies, and then breath coming to life. It sounds like something out of the old Hammer Horror films I watched as a boy. Yet, it is a vision that reveals the glory of God, his faithfulness to His people, and our part in bringing His kingdom to the world. It may seem strange to equate visions of dry dusty bones as an image of new life, life resurrected, but as we approach Easter they are just as valid as rabbits, chickens and eggs, for those images speak about birth, whereas dry, dusty bones, being re-clothed in flesh speak of resurrection. In Ezekiel we see a foreshadowing of the life that comes through the word and life of Christ Jesus.

There are two things in Ezekiel that strike me: Firstly, that God is pro-active in affirming his promise. God initiates the action, he speaks to Ezekiel and takes him to the valley, commanding him to preach. God resurrects his people, the dead restored to life, and in that action the glory of God is revealed. God says so himself, in Verse 14 “I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.....then you shall know that I, the Lord have spoken, and I have done it”.

Secondly, while God is pro-active, he still requires Ezekiel to play his part. God doesn't just resurrect the nation. Ezekiel must first preach the word of God to the valley of bones. Only when he has preached does God resurrect the people. Clearly, God is faithful, his word powerful, but as he does so often he chooses to work through someone, in this instance Ezekiel. For me the lesson here is that we are required to play our part. Resurrection is a gift of God, life is a gift of God, but we must choose to accept it, accept our role in God's work, for God almost always will work through us.

God is faithful and all powerful, and that gives me hope. It tells me that if we remain hopeful and faithful that anything is possible. We are living in a changing world, the future uncertain, but we are loved by a changeless God who walks with us. What changes we face are unclear, but what is clear is that if we remain faithful, there is always a future.

Again we see these themes repeated, perhaps even more forcefully in the story of Lazarus. Jesus' love of Lazarus, Mary and Martha is clearly demonstrated. He is distraught when he sees that they are distraught, even though he knows Lazarus will rise he shares their pain and sorrow at his death. In this he shows that God walks beside us and shares our journey.

But there is something else here that is relevant to our troubles today.

When Jesus says to Martha "Your brother will rise again", Martha assumes he means on the day of Judgement and says "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day". Which of us would argue with that, that's what we are taught to believe.

Yet Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die". There is an immediacy in these words that hints at life now. That immediacy is made apparent when Jesus raises Lazarus. The power and glory of God revealed and made apparent.

For those that believe, there is always life. If current circumstances lead us to fear and doubt, take note of the power and glory of God and his concern and love for his people. Life in Christ is real, both in this world and the next. We may not be living quite the way we did, we may not be worshipping quite the way we did, but take heart, there is a future, for you, for me, for our church. In changing times, God will provide new opportunities for us. We just need to be faithful and prepared to embrace them. We can move forward with confidence that life continues, that there will always be a way to live and worship, for one thing is certain, God is with us, and there is always life in Christ Jesus. Amen