

## **Whoever Lives and Believes in Me**

### **22 March - 5th Sunday of Lent**

Ezekiel 37.1-14, Psalm 130 (p. 364), Romans 8.6-11, John 11.1-45

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel tells of the loss and despair that the people suffered when they were exiled to Babylon. They lost almost everything that mattered to them. They had to leave their homes, their temple, the life they had as God's people, and the support of being a community with common beliefs and values. Have you lived in a very diverse community? A very homogenous one? [ ... ] They were really used to the 2<sup>nd</sup> experience.

How could they be who they were meant to be, the Lord's people, in this strange land with no support, no comfort, no self-knowledge and no self-confidence in their identity as God's own people?

Their plight was real, and Ezekiel reaffirmed that they were in a very sorry state that they could not change by their own power. You might recall something similar from Ephesians 2:1, 4-5 [ESV] "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy... made us alive together with Christ". These are two different kinds of exile. but they share a common desire for return and restoration.

The prophet Ezekiel said, "These bones are the people of Israel. ... The Sovereign Lord says: 'My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ... I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live.'"

God's people were all but dead in their spiritual life. Only the Lord could breathe new life into them and bring them back from spiritual death to spiritual life. If God's people are to have life in all its fullness, they must turn and return to the Lord God. If they do this, God will return them to the life that they long for.

This is echoed in Psalm 130. Call on God, seek forgiveness, wait and hope. Have trust and confidence in the promises of God. All shall be well, despite past and present problems.

The psalm reflects this cry from the depths of misery, begging for rescue, for forgiveness. After the cry for forgiveness, there is the waiting. The one who cries out to God watches and waits with trust, hope and expectation, knowing what the Lord can and will do.

Paul's letter to the Romans gives a very similar message. It tells us that we, too, are to wait with our minds attuned to the Spirit, not to the things of this world, the things of the flesh, the things of this physical life, the ever-present temptation to neglect the spiritual life.

However, Paul encourages us that if the Spirit of God lives in us, then we are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit. And if Christ is in us, then despite our struggles, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. Righteousness is that combination of holiness and justice, loving God and loving our neighbour, being right with both. And there is a bonus. *If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in us. (v. 11)* We will have life, abundant life, life in all its fullness.

Where are our hearts? Where are our minds? We can turn from the things of this world to the Spirit, from being lost to being found, from death to life. If we belong to Christ, and the Spirit of God is in us, then that same Spirit gives us life. And this is because the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also raises us to life. To live in Christ is life in all its fullness.

And so, speaking of raising from the dead, we go on to the Gospel reading and the story of Lazarus. Here's a puzzle. Why does It say, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So ,when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days." Jesus loved them, so he did not go with them when he heard about Lazarus. What's that about? [...]

Responses?

What comes just before that? [ ...] (Verses 4 and 5)

That gives us a clue. It is not that Jesus did not care. When he did get close to Bethany, Martha and then Mary met him, and they went to the tomb. And we hear that **Jesus wept**. We weep at the death of those we love, even though we know it is not the end for them. It is the end of a chapter of our relationship, but not the end of the story.

Another interesting detail in verses 25 to 27.

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'"

Did Jesus say this to Mary, who, we hear, was the one who sat at the feet of Jesus, learning from him like many other disciples? Or was it Martha, the practical one, the one who typically did the many routine tasks to provide hospitality for Jesus and his disciples when they visited her home? Who was Jesus talking to about this very theological perception of him and his ministry? The one in the classroom or the one in the kitchen? [ ... ]

It was Martha, so we cannot pigeon-hole these 2 sisters as many have done in the past. Jesus shared his identity as the Son of God with Martha.

When the family were reluctant to open the tomb because they believed that the body of Lazarus was already decomposing, Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” The glory of God is a physical manifestation of God’s power and presence. In this case, it was to be a living, breathing Lazarus, walking out of the tomb.

Today’s glimpse of relationship with God has taken us from the valley of dry, dead bones, through exile from God, to life in the Spirit, to resurrection. That’s quite a journey, quite a thread to follow in our exploration of these readings, quite a story of divine power and human faith.

We, too, can turn to the Lord even in times of deepest sorrow. Through faith in the life of the Spirit, we can turn to Christ. We can walk away from all that destroys and find new life.

Through the power of the Spirit, we too can be raised to new life in Christ and serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives. This we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.