



Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2020

Anglican Parish of Raymond Terrace
www.stjohnsraymondterrace.org

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

When we were forced to close our buildings and I decided that we would broadcast our services online, I thought that one reading on these last Sundays during Lent would be enough – since they were long readings. Today we have a wealth, and a richness of message in all our designated readings that I have decided to share them all.

Our passage from Ezekiel 37 is the familiar story about the Valley of Dry Bones – where this vision illustrates the promise of the previous chapter – new life and a nation restored – both physically and spiritually. The dry bones are a picture of the Jews in captivity – scattered and dead. In the 3 verses which follow our passage for today, there is talk of 2 sticks – representing the reunion of the entire nation of Israel – a resurrection, a new life – that had divided into northern and southern kingdoms following the reign of King Solomon. The scattered exiles of both Israel and Judah would be released from their “graves” of captivity and one day be regathered in

their homeland – with the Messiah as their leader. Sounds really good to me! As GOD brought life to the dead bones, He would bring life again to His spiritually dead people.

The dry bones represented the people's spiritually dead condition. Our community has gone into a partial hibernation – a type of spiritual death that has been coming upon us for many years. GOD promised Israel that He would restore them. We have 2 options here – we can simply give up – OR – pray for renewal – because GOD CAN restore us to life with Him. The hope and prayer of every Church needs to be for GOD to re-fresh us with His Spirit. In verses 13 & 14, it says: ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.' GOD is at work calling His people back to Himself – in order to bring new life into spiritually dead and dying churches.

The Apostle Paul divides people into 2 categories – those who are dominated by their sinful nature; and those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit. All of us would be in the first category if JESUS hadn't offered us a way out. Once we have said YES to JESUS, we will want to continue following Him, because His way brings life and peace. Daily, we must choose to centre our lives on GOD. Our Bible is our instruction manual and needs to be our FIRST RESORT not our last one.

As Christians we need to sincerely trust that the Holy Spirit has come into our lives – not because of some feeling we may get but because JESUS said that He would send His Holy Spirit to us. With the Holy Spirit working within us, we will believe that JESUS CHRIST is GOD's Son and that eternal life comes through Him, we will begin to act as JESUS directs us, we will find help with our daily problems and in our praying, we will be empowered to serve GOD and seek to do His will; and we will become a part of GOD's plan to build up His

Church. The Holy Spirit is in us now by faith; and by faith we are certain to live with JESUS forever.

Our Gospel passage today is about JESUS and his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. As their brother's health became progressively worse, Mary and Martha turned to JESUS for help. We should always follow their example when we need assistance.

Any trial we face can ultimately bring glory to GOD because GOD can bring good out of any bad situation. In the book of Genesis – at 50:20, when Joseph forgave his brothers, he said: **Even though you intended to do harm to me, GOD intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today.**

JESUS loved this family and often stayed with them. He knew their pain but did not respond immediately. His delay had a specific purpose. GOD's timing – especially His delays – make us think that He is not answering or at least not in the way we want. But He will meet our needs according to His perfect schedule and purpose. We are told by Paul in his letter to the Philippians, 4:19 **I am**

convinced that my GOD will fully satisfy every need you have; for I have seen the abundant riches of glory revealed to me through the Anointed One, JESUS CHRIST. Patience is the key as we walk in the daylight of the knowledge of GOD in the person of CHRIST JESUS.

If JESUS had been with Lazarus during the final moments of his sickness, He might have healed him rather than let him die. But Lazarus died so that JESUS' power over death could be shown to His disciples and others. The raising of Lazarus was an essential display of His power; and the resurrection from the dead is a crucial belief of Christian faith. JESUS Himself rose from the dead but through His power He could also raise others. It has been said through our current COVID-19 crisis that we are all going through it together. This was the attitude of the disciples as they walked with JESUS through His ministry here on earth. Thomas has been branded as a "doubter" but in this situation, he and the community of disciples all felt the same. Even though

they tried and failed to talk JESUS out of going back to Jerusalem, they were willing to go with Him – even if this meant that they might have to die with Him. Because JESUS is the Creator of life, He has the power over, not only death and life but also to forgive sins. Whoever believes in JESUS has a spiritual life that death cannot conquer or diminish in any way. When we realise His power and how wonderful His offer to us really is, how can we help but commit our lives to Him. To those of us who believe, what wonderful assurance we certainly have.

We have a GOD who really cares. JESUS wept openly when He saw the weeping and wailing around Him. Perhaps He empathised with their grief; or perhaps He was troubled at their unbelief. In either case, JESUS showed us that He cares enough for us to weep with us in our sorrow. JESUS shows us many emotions – compassion, indignation, sorrow, even frustration. We must learn from Him to never be afraid to reveal our true feelings. JESUS already knows and cares about them.

The last 3 verses of our gospel today say this: ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ ⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Even when Lazarus was raised to new life, he was still wearing the clothes of his old life. That is why JESUS said: ‘Unbind him and let him go.’ Even Lazarus needed the help of his community to achieve this. Many of the Jews believed. But sadly, some refused. Some of the eyewitnesses even began to plot JESUS’ murder – rather than admit they were wrong.



We as Church have been placed into an enforced public - gathering hibernation during this COVID-19 crisis. We are taking advantage of the technology available to us to connect with each other and those around us. We could come out at the end of it and still be wearing the same clothes that have bound us for years. We need to be

unbound from everything that holds us back from sharing the Good News of JESUS.

The readings for today are well connected. From Ezekiel we heard the familiar story of the Valley of Dry Bones – where the constraints of death were systematically removed, and they were brought back to life as the Spirit of GOD breathed life into them.

Our passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans reminded us that we need to trust the Spirit of GOD already within us.

And our Gospel passage demonstrates that victory over death can only be achieved by faith in JESUS – that the clothes that bind us to the past must be removed and replaced with our resurrection garment. Even when this is done, it must be done with the help of our community. For those who have been journeying through the Lent Study Book published by the Diocese, the Reverend Di Langham, in her reflection said that she “[had always seen the Anglican Church coming to Australia in a pot plant. The pot plant was placed on the land –](#)

[presumably still in its pot.] The pot needs to be broken and the roots of the Church grow and mingle in this land. GOD did not arrive here on the front of Captain Cook's boat – GOD was already here!" And then 2 of her points to ponder:

1. Over the years Christian Churches have tried to treat JESUS as though HE was a precious pot plant and tried to keep Him root bound. Think about the ways we try to keep JESUS to ourselves.
2. How are we allowing JESUS and the Gospel message to break free of social and historical constraints?

When this time of hibernation is over, as we are called to COME OUT – we need to break open the pots in which our faith is contained and allow it to freely mingle with the community around us. May we recognise GOD's Spirit within us and allow GOD to breathe new life into us all.



May we pray

Almighty and everliving GOD, we turn to you in times of suffering and pain, seeking the tender assurance of your care. Grant us a spirit of hope, so we might live with renewed fervour as we wait the fullness of life in heaven. We pray this in the name of JESUS CHRIST our LORD. Amen.

References:

Welborn, Amy – 2020 A Book of Grace-Filled Days
Sacred Space 2020
Life Application Study Bible