

Can These Bones Live Ezekiel 37:1-14

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

We Christians have some very distinctive, and some very special, things to say about death; and all three readings this morning deal with the issue of *death* and *life*, and they all turn our worldly view of *death* on its head.

In connection with God there is certainty of life in the face of death. There is hope and a future where there is *death*, when and where God determines. But yet, at the same time, if we turn our backs on God and what he has to say, then he assures us that *death* in all its severity will be there for us both in this life and in eternity.

It is through the readings that we discover that all is not lost. That God does not leave us with out hope. In the first reading we hear one of the most dramatic readings in all Scripture. It is Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.

To give you some context, we need to look at a bit of biblical history: In 597 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar defeated king Jehoiachin of Judah. Plunder was taken, the leadership, the craftsmen and artisans were deported to Babylon, and among them was the prophet Ezekiel. It was while he was in exile that Ezekiel was brought by the hand and spirit of God to a valley full of dry human bones.

What a dismal place this would have been. A valley full of human bones baked white and dry on the desert floor. Could this be the same valley where King Zedekiah's sons and army were put to death? We aren't told, but it could very well be that Ezekiel was looking at the bones of his own Hebrew community lying in a foreign land in dishonour.

In other word's the valley of dry bones Ezekiel is looking at and prophesying to is Israel. The great nation God had raised up to be a blessing for all the world is gone. There are a handful of exiles in Babylon with a few memories, fewer hopes, and a lot of hate for the people they're blaming for their problems. And there were a few folks left in Judah that the Babylonians figured weren't worth the effort to haul off. That was it. As far as the people were concerned, Israel was dead. Never in the history of mankind had a nation so defeated and so scattered ever been rebuilt. Ezekiel knew that, the Babylonians knew that, everybody knew that. It caused the people in exile to cry out saying '*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off*' (Eze 37:11). Death, it would seem, ruled Israel in the days that Ezekiel prophesied.

The Old Testament reading in itself presents an eerier picture, like something out of a horror movie. Ezekiel is brought by God to a valley that is filled with bones. God asks him, *“Mortal, can these bones live?”* Ezekiel responds with a statement of faith *“O Lord God, you know”*. As we heard, Ezekiel prophesies to the bones as he is instructed to by God, and the bones begin to come back together, bone on bone, sinew on sinew.

But these bodies did not live. Then he prophesied a second time, and from the four winds, the breath of God came, and breathed into them. As happened with the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, when filled with the divine breath, these bones became living beings. He prophesied a third time, and with that prophecy what was despair turned to hope. God promised a new future for the people of Israel, new hope and new life, brought about by the spirit, the breath the wind, that God would breathe into them.

This reading is filled with vivid imagery, many of us might find it repellent. No matter how many Hollywood movies we’ve seen, in which the special effects are used to both frighten and thrill us, no matter how many zombie apocalypse movies we may have seen, when it comes right down to it, most of us are really uncomfortable with the idea conveyed in this story. Most of us have an aversion to dead bodies and our rational scientific minds shy away from the idea that a body once dead, let alone a pile of bones, could come back to life.

However we might respond to the image of dry bones being reconnected to tissue and eventually coming to life, the care with which the gospel writer describes the resurrection of Lazarus is probably even more offensive, especially for the people of Jesus day. Lazarus, like Israel was dead. In fact he was literally dead and buried. He had been dead for four days, Martha, as we heard, stressed that decomposition has begun and that there would be a stench when the tomb was opened. Furthermore, it was taught by the rabbis that having been dead for this long meant that all that was left was corruption. Death ruled over Lazarus.

Through out history bodily resurrection has been associated with ghouls and monsters - just think about stories like Frankenstein or Dracula, where the un-dead, those brought back to life are not human, and do not live human lives. They are always portrayed as being imperfect or corrupted, whether they are physically, mentally, morally or spiritually damaged in one way or another.

But interestingly, God turns this thinking on its head. Instead of turning what was once seen as good and perfect into something less, God turns what was imperfect and less than good into something that is perfect and good in His sight.

The bones Ezekiel saw were “*very dry*.” They had been on that valley floor, under the merciless heat of the sun, until they were sapped of all moisture. In that dead, dry condition, they were fit for nothing but to be gathered and buried. These bones represented the Israelite nation - cutoff from God and spiritually left for dead; and yet, they also represent us. We need to recognise that this is the very condition that we also live in. St. Paul writes, “*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one*” (Ro 3:10–12). Here we are reminded that as sinners we are dead to God.

As we look into the times in which we live, so much of what we see is filled with dread, uncertainty, suffering, and the problems that face us as the people of God. It is filled with dread and fear of the pestilence that is upon us. It continually invites us to look at our future in despair; whether that is our personal futures, that of the church, our town, our state or our country. The future of the world, our way of life, especially today seems in doubt, and it is so easy to get downtrodden or depressed by the insurmountable problems that surround us.

As we look around us we see the devastation in the world and we see that we are lost, that we are trapped in a quagmire of sin, and that we cannot escape. In other words, we are spiritually dead and devastated by our sins.

The bones spoke of death, firstly of the dead Israelites, but also of the spiritual dead of the future. What do you see when you look at the world around you? Although people around us may be living their lives as best they can at this time, working their jobs where they can, raising their families; while they may be charming, intellectual, reasonable, and apparently fit (although that is not guaranteed), they are all spiritually dead. And this not just the case out there, outside of the church, it is no different in here.

Think about the words that we just heard that St. Paul wrote. *For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

Even so this morning we heard God ask, “Can these bones live?” Our Lenten journey has brought us to this point, to this question. As we have moved through this Lenten season we have continually been pointed back toward Jesus and what He has done for us. We have been reminded over and over again that it is through Jesus Christ, His death on the cross and His resurrection that we have been renewed, that we have

been restored, and that through faith in Him we too will be resurrected to eternal life with Him in His heavenly kingdom. Lent is a time to meditate on the word of God, so that we come to a greater appreciation of what God has done for us in the giving of His only Son as a sacrifice to redeem the lost sinners of this world. The Father sent His Son to shed His blood so that we might live. He sent the perfect sacrifice to make what was imperfect and less than good into what is perfect and good in His sight.

It is here, as we hear His word that we are given the promise only God can give. God tells the prophet to speak to these bones, saying, *“Thus says the Lord God: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.”* This breath is the spirit of God, it is the same life-giving breath that God breathed into the first human being in the garden of Eden.

This is the same breath that the gospel account speaks of this morning; the same breath that was breathed into the dead body of Lazarus as he was raised to life again. It is the same breath of God that was breathed into the dead body of Jesus in the tomb that caused us to hear the good news on Easter Sunday: *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen”* (Luke 24: 5).

And it is also the same breath that touched us at our baptisms. We were given the gift of the Holy Spirit to be living sons and daughters of the living God. This breath moves through the world, and raises people into new life even though all the odds are against it.

As we contemplate what the readings mean for us here today, the central message for us is clear enough: God can breathe new life into old bones. It applies to us as a community of faith that others would have us believe to have been defeated, perhaps even destroyed like an army that has been overcome in battle. It applies to the individual person who feels defeated in life and faith and has lost hope.

Remember the words Jesus gave to help Martha. Christ gave to her that saying which has benefited Christians ever since; *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* These words have been spoken on many occasions since to give reassurance, particularly at the time of death. But these words can also give hope in times of life.

You see, it is through Jesus Christ that we can live the day-to-day lives of ordinary people that have been resurrected. Souls, our souls, which appeared dead and lifeless, have been restored to life and vitality. They were like Ezekiel’s dry bones, but yet through our Lord Jesus Christ we have risen out of the sleep of death into which we were born, and we have been given true life to the glory of the Father through His Son.

Amen