

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year A

Colour purple

First Reading Ezekiel 37.1-14

The Valley of Dry Bones

37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 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."

What's going on?

This is a miraculous vision granted to the prophet Ezekiel. In his vision, he sees a valley full of dried up human bones. The bones seem to be at the end of the process of decay. The human beings they belong to are dead and gone. God however, suggests that they can be brought back to life and with God's miraculous power the dry bones are reconnected into living skeletons, then bodies with flesh and finally reconstituted as living human beings with God's spirit within them. God then, has the power to save and resurrect the dead, and as we stand on the threshold of Easter, this is a very significant message.

Within Ezekiel's context, this is an allegory to tell the people of Israel that no matter how dead and scattered their community feels, God can revivify them and breathe life into them once more. So the vision is one of hope out of despair, new life from a feeling of being totally dead and cut off. God can bring back the abandoned ones, can raise the lost to new life.

Psalm 130

Waiting for Divine Redemption

A Song of Ascents.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

² Lord, hear my voice!

**Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!**

**³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?**

**⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.**

**⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.**

**⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.**

**⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.**

What's going on?

The psalmist sings of being in a place far from God, but waiting in hope and anticipation for the redemptive power of the Lord. God will hear the cry of his people and his love will save and transform them.

Romans 8.6-11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

What's going on?

St Paul echoes the picture set forth in Ezekiel, but to make a theological point to his friends. If we settle only for a physical view of the world in which we are creatures only of physical desires and processes, then all we

will see and know are physical bodies which die and decay. Experiencing life in this way will not set our minds and hearts on God. But Christians have the ability to connect with and live within God's Holy Spirit. This allows us to live in a different way, connected to God's saving power, the power that can bring life from death, and so make possible to live in the expectation and hope of eternal life with God. The resurrection of Jesus confirms this to us and so belief in Jesus gives us access to that same miraculous saving power that God has demonstrated.

John 11. 1-45

The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2**Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. **3**So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." **4**But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." **5**Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, **6**after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." **8**The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" **9**Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. **10**But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." **11**After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." **12**The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." **13**Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. **14**Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. **15**For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." **16**Thomas, who was called the Twin said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. **18**Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles

away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus Weeps

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent

me." 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."

What's going on?

The readings we have had already prepare us for this moving, dramatic and amazing story, in which God's desire to save and overcome the finality of physical human death is demonstrated by Jesus. This is not a demonstration of power in a valley of dry bones, but the bringing back of a loved one, mourned in death by Jesus.

The gospel writer presents the story on a number of levels. At the centre is the miracle. Lazarus is not asleep, not in a coma, and not just gravely ill. Jesus makes this clear. He is not only dead but his body has been buried and is decomposing. He is utterly gone. When Jesus calls him out, he is wearing his burial cloths. Yet he comes out by himself in obedience to Jesus' call. He is alive and restored.

On another level this story illustrates a theological truth. Jesus says 'those who believe in me, even though they die, will live'. He makes the point which confirms the psalmist's hope and explains what St Paul talks about in Romans. Belief in Jesus means that the physical death of the body is not the end of human existence. The power of God and the desire of God to save human beings is demonstrated by the Lazarus story.

There is yet another level which is that the promise of eternal life may be wonderful but it does not protect us from the pain of loss and bereavement. This story is full of grief and Jesus too weeps for the loss of his friend in death. In this life on earth, loss and bereavement is something we will all experience and it will hurt, but one thing we can keep is hope and faith in God's promises. Martha and Mary had faith in Jesus and trusted in him. They could never have expected him to bring back Lazarus from death itself, and yet he did.