

SERMON FOR PASSION SUNDAY | 02.04.17

Everyone loves a good story. A book, a film, something in the news: it is through stories that so much of what we think and believe are shaped. You can try to teach people by reciting rules and regulations until you are blue in the face: but if you can tell them a story, the job is almost done for you.

Today we have two massive stories to wrestle with: one from Ezekiel and one from St John's Gospel. There is almost too much to take in but they are offered to us because - while they each make a point - they teach us far more when we run them together.

The prophet Ezekiel was caught up in the harrowing events of 6th century Israel. In 597BC King Johoachim surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonian army and along with 10,000 members of his army, the whole civil service and all the craftsmen, he was taken into exile. Ezekiel was in his mid-twenties and was just about to be apprenticed to be a priest like his father. Exile was the end of his hopes just as it was for the whole nation.

But five years later, stuck in Babylon, Ezekiel receives the most extraordinary vision and the calling - not be a priest but to be a prophet. In the vision, God is dazzling - all seeing, all knowing. And the contrast is all the greater because he then looks at his fellow human beings and he sees them in all their despair and weakness. They are finished politically but Ezekiel sees beyond that: he sees these men and women as completely vacuous and spent - not by military defeat but by sin. This exile was not some kind of political change like Brexit, this exile was a sign of God's judgement.

So the early chapters of Ezekiel's talk not just of what has happened to the people of Israel, but about each person's individual responsibility for the state in which they find themselves. And, better than almost any of the prophets, he shares his message in flamboyant symbols and stories.

Then, by Chapter 37, having set out the problem, Ezekiel begins to offer a more apocalyptic vision: a new vision of hope and of renewal and he does this in the vision of the valley of dry bones. After ten years in exile, the people of Israel had given up all hope. The Temple had been destroyed and the leadership had given up any thought of ever returning home. Hence the picture of a valley, strewn with dead bones.

Bones, for the ancients, represented their 'life force', their energy – 'themselves' in the very deepest sense. And their bones are described as *completely dried up*, cut off from the world of the living and equally, cut off from God's care.

To God's question, *can these bones live?* Ezekiel has no answer. How would he know? So God instructs him to use the prophetic powers that he had been given and to 'summon' the bones back into their places as skeletons.

And how was that to be done? By calling up God's '*ruach*' the word in Hebrew for both wind and spirit. It was to be the spirit of God that would transform this mass of dead bones into living beings once more. New life would spring up in the valley of bones – as it says, a vast multitude who would ultimately be returned to their homeland once more. It is a wonderfully positive story for a people who have had everything taken from them and it is a story for exiles everywhere, in Turkey and Syria and Lebanon and Jordan and Burma and wherever people are left to feel that they will never return home. This is renewal at its best.

It is therefore connected to – but not the same as - the story of Lazarus. True, Lazarus is brought back to life like the bones in Ezekiel's valley but, in the hands of Jesus, the outcome is quite, quite different.

We are into day four of the mourning process for the departed Lazarus. By custom it was thought that the spirit of the dead person hung around for three days after death, so we are beyond that and into the dull and cruel realisation that our loved one was never going to come back. The village was crawling with people wanting to come and offer what they could to the two sisters, Martha and Mary. And to start with the sisters' comments to Jesus are still a bit reproachful and stuck in the past, *Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died.*

And they had a point: Jesus loved Lazarus and he had a track record for bringing the dead back to life. Who better displayed the *ruach* of God, the spirit of the Father, than Jesus?

But Jesus is not going to get stuck there: this story is not about the restoration of his friend to the life he had already experienced. Instead we get the enigmatic statement, *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, they will live – and everyone who live and believe in me will never die.*

And in a phrase, Jesus has taken us out of the valley of dry bones and into another territory altogether and it has very little to do with physical death and everything to do with replacing spiritual death – the death that happens when we sin - with the Spirit filled life of Jesus himself.

We are talking, not about bones but about the Cross.

Many Christians around the world call today 'Passion Sunday' although, confusingly, Roman Catholics officially call Palm Sunday which we celebrate next week, Passion Sunday. And in a strange custom that only makes sense if we think about it, the crosses and all other pictures and statues in Church are veiled in purple cloth.

Why? To draw attention to the Cross as the key challenge to all of us as we look for God's spirit to take hold of us and to bring us back to life. For while Ezekiel's picture was about strength – a new power being given to the dead bones in the valley – the Cross is about stripping away a delusion.

Those who you who have had anything to do with therapeutic communities like Alcoholics Anonymous will know that the first challenge to every person joining the programme is to face up to the delusion that there is really nothing wrong with them. The term is 'to be in denial'. Just like the slave traders or the guards at Auschwitz, what we see is the great delusion, the ancient art of self-deception. Somehow we are so good at managing to persuade ourselves that what they were doing is not really that wicked and evil. We're fine really...

Yet the proper Christian answer is not a dose of self-correction and moral strengthening so that we can be more like our better selves. Instead we learn to accept that sin has got such a hold on us that there was no alternative but for God to intervene. In the words of St John: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.*

And how does that play itself out in the story of Lazarus? Perhaps not surprisingly when the penny drops for Martha. She is the key. Although she has been twittering on with practical things, telling Jesus how Lazarus' body would be stinking by now, it is her faith which enables Jesus to work the miracle: Jesus asks her if she believes that all those who trust in him would never die? And her answer is as clear as a bell: *Yes Lord, she says, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*

And I hope you can hear an echo of the Baptism service there: directly before someone is Christened, we say together the words of the Creed. I then say, *Now there is nothing to stop those who believe from being baptized.*

And that is the difference between Restoration – the return of us as we were as shown in Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones – and Resurrection, the end of the denial and the self-delusion. Hear Martha: *Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.*

On Passion Sunday we focus on the Cross because as the (first) hymn by Brian Foley has it,

***For on Christ’s shoulders God has placed
the yoke of sin that we should wear;
yet by his cross we all have peace
if we will learn it’s weight to share.***

No more delusions; no more ‘self-improvement’. We can’t get into heaven, we can’t even be truly happy, until we have thrown away the self-denial and accepted that only by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross can our sin be taken away.

So today the stories of Ezekiel and Lazarus: not restoration of the old but resurrection - through the Cross - to all that is new.