

Passion Sunday
29.3.20, Howell Hill
Ezekiel 37; Psalm 130; Romans 6, John 11

Hello everyone, and welcome to the second of our bishops' Sunday Sermons during this extraordinary time that we're all living through. I do hope that you were able to pick up Bishop Jo's sermon for Mothering Sunday, recorded in her local parish church of St. Mary's Shalford – and if not, do check it out on our diocesan website, because it's really good. And today I was due to record this in a different kind of Church building: St Paul's Howell Hill, affectionately known as the Starship Enterprise. But in the end being beamed up to St. Paul's didn't quite fit in the category of 'essential travel', so here we are instead in my little home chapel at Willow Grange.

And wherever you are watching this from, please be assured that the Lord is there – and God's Spirit is with you.

And so may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

By nature I've always been a fairly organised kind of person, someone who likes to be pretty much in control of my life. At the beginning of most days I write a list of the things I want to achieve – maybe 10, 12 or 15 bullet points long - and then find great satisfaction in ticking them off one by one. I've even got it so bad that I sometimes write down things I've already done, only so as to tick them off right away.

Of course, my life, like yours, isn't quite like that in reality. Every day produces the odd surprises, which can throw the schedules of even the most organised among us. But even there I've got an answer, provided on one of those Time Management courses I once attended: keeping maybe 45 minutes each day where there's nothing booked, so that I can expect the unexpected and be properly prepared for it. And in normal circumstances it sort of works, with only the odd lapse where a letter goes missing, or an email slips through the net, or – most often of all - inspiration for the next sermon is especially hard to find.

So what happens when something comes along which suddenly, dramatically, defies every attempt to organise it – indeed, which almost defies every attempt to organise anything? How can even an Oxbridge doctorate in Time Management Studies equip us for those once or twice-in-a-lifetime events that can truly be described as 'cataclysmic'?

It's a question that has faced many of us in a personal sense: perhaps with a visit to the doctor which began with the words, 'It's bad news, I'm afraid', or maybe with the sudden and unexpected death of a partner or parent or child. At such times, people speak of the bottom having fallen out of their world, an experience that is all the more surreal because everyone else is just getting on with life as normal.

It's also a question, though, that has faced *very few* of us in a broader national, let alone global sense, shielded as we are largely are from the famines and earthquakes and civil wars and plagues of locusts that can afflict others around the globe: so that here, today, now, there is a very real sense that we're

having to make it up as we go along, sitting at the front of this speeding train like Gromit the dog and frantically laying the track before us.

And as so often, our lectionary readings today: Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones in chapter 37 of his stunning prophecy, and the raising of Lazarus in John chapter 11, speak into our situation with extraordinary power and clarity.

Think about poor Ezekiel for a moment. Along with the sudden death of his wife, movingly described as the 'delight of his eyes', Ezekiel lived at a time of national crisis, when the land of Judah was overrun by the mighty Babylonian army. Jerusalem was destroyed – its walls, its houses, and most gut-wrenchingly of all – the glorious Temple which lay its heart; and a large number of Jews (himself included) were carted off into exile, gloomily sitting by the rivers of Babylon and dreaming dark dreams of revenge: even of taking Babylonian babies and bashing their heads in.

Or think of poor Mary and Martha in the little town of Bethany: not so bothered by geopolitical events or national crises, as Ezekiel was, but experiencing instead a terrible personal tragedy, the death of their beloved brother Lazarus: an event made still harder to bear by the sense that Jesus could have prevented it, if only he'd bothered to show up a few days earlier.

From the global to the domestic, from the macro to the micro, there is at least one thing that the Fall of Jerusalem and the death of Lazarus have in common: that however organised Ezekiel might be, and however competent those two sisters, the best thing they could possibly do at that moment was to hang on in there with an almost reckless faith, humbly acknowledging that, as Jesus once put it, 'Without me you can do nothing'.

And that's the place in which Ezekiel had a dream, and here it is – read by my daughter Hannah, from Ezekiel chapter 37 verses 1-6:

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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I 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."

A valley full of the driest of bones: the scene of a battleground where no-one had bothered to bury the bodies: a nightmare image which brilliantly expressed the sheer hopelessness of those Israelites as they sat by the rivers of Babylon, having nightmares of their own. But wait a minute: there was a fresh instruction here: to bring the Word of the Lord to these driest of bones: a Word that would bring them all together, as the toe bone connected to the foot bone and the foot bone connected to the heel bone; and as bone joined bone and sinew sinew, and as flesh covered the sinews, and skin the flesh – until those piles of bones had been transformed into an army of people – extraordinary, except that they were still dead.

And so to stage two: not an instruction to Ezekiel this time, but a command to the breath of God, the Holy Spirit: 'Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live' – which is just what happened. And finally the interpretation of the dream from verse 11:

“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.’ 12 Therefore prophesy, 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. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I 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.”

New hope. New life. A new future: so that what we *need* in cataclysmic times, we learn, is the Word of the Lord that holds us together and the Spirit of the Lord who enlivens us. Whatever our Rivers of Babylon - wherever we are sitting today, at home or in exile – be nourished by the Word of the Lord we find in this extraordinary book, and pray for the breath of God to come from the four winds so that – whatever the constraints right now - we might truly live.

So what about our gospel reading, and this little local tragedy, as Mary and Martha wept at the tomb of their dear brother Lazarus, and Jesus joined in the weeping too? Again it's the most hopeless of images, and at first Jesus seems to join in with the hopelessness. But here's how the story continues, from John chapter 11 verse 38:

38 Then Jesus, greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus 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.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I 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.” 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 The 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.”

‘Lazarus, come out’: the Word of the Lord, combined with the Spirit of the Lord, drawing together and enlivening a decaying corpse. New hope. New life. A new future.

And so as we choose with Ezekiel, and with Mary and Martha to hang on in there today, with an almost reckless faith, humbly acknowledging that without Jesus we can do nothing; as we face a week, perhaps several months, in which there will be severe challenges, both global and domestic, and personal tragedies too; as we seek to establish new disciplines during this extraordinary time, including prayer and study, rest and recreation, pastoral care and spiritual encouragement; so let's draw strength from the Word of God and the Spirit of God, who together bring hope into the most challenging of human situations.

The epistle reading today is taken from Romans 8, verses 6-11, a reading that speaks of life and peace, and the comforting Spirit of the One who ‘raised Jesus from the dead’ and who now ‘dwells in you’. And the last verses of that great Chapter bring it all together – verses I proclaimed whilst conducting my dear father's funeral last October:

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? **32** He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? **33** Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. **34** Who is to condemn? It is

Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. **35** Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray: *Church's Collect for this Passion Sunday:*

*Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

God bless you and your loved ones. Thanks for tuning in.