

Fleshing Out Hope!

Ezekiel 37¹⁻¹⁴; Psalm 130; Romans 8⁶⁻¹¹; John 11¹⁻⁴⁵

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die. (John 11²⁵)

On Thursday this week, working towards our re-ordering, we had two 'experts' call to have a look at our pews. It was a fascinating encounter. One of them had been doing research on the evolution of the seating in St Mary's and came across an interesting story. Prior to the 1875 rebuild of this Church (and for some time after) if you wanted a good seat, you had to pay for it and the money went to the Rector as part of his income. The seats before these, for those who could afford them, were high-walled box pews: the only person who might be able to see you was the preacher from a high pulpit. One chap objected to the new design of the pews, all with one level of backs, designed to give a uniform appearance. The whole scheme almost collapsed because he refused his permission and wanted to keep the pew in which he felt private and safe. The architect said that he would deal with it and, when he met the chap, did offer to have his pew top at the same level as the others, but that he would dig it deeper so that effectively he was much lower than everyone else. The chap then agreed to the changes as, he said, that arrangement would feel too much like stepping down into his own grave.

Thinking about this, I did wonder why he (like so many) sees death as such an unwelcome inevitability?

Two great readings today - both exploring the same theme: the hope of life beyond life

- ✦ Ezekiel shares a vision of the future where death and destruction is reversed in his vision of the **dry bones**. He is told to **prophesy** - the result is that **the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude**. The message is then applied to the **house of Israel** with a promise that God will resurrect them and return them to their home.
- ✦ John records the story of the death and resurrection of **Lazarus**. The story itself is fascinating:
 - ✦ Jesus gets the message that the **one whom you love is ill**. Jesus delays and confidently says that **this illness does not lead to death**. It will be so that **the Son of God may be glorified**. So Jesus stays put.
 - ✦ Jesus then tells his disciples that **our friend, Lazarus, has fallen asleep** but that misled the disciples who thought **he will be alright**. Jesus had to be blunt: **Lazarus is dead**. Then he says, **For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe** (one of the great themes in John's Gospel).

- ✦ The scene in Bethany was one of grieving - **Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days**. As would be customary, the community gather around the two sisters to support them.
- ✦ The anger and disappointment in the family - the belief that Jesus had let them down - was voiced by Martha (the sister who Luke tells us was **distracted by her many tasks**) who storms, **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died**. The promise that he will **rise again** is known by Martha, but she doesn't appear too impressed to have to wait for it!
- ✦ Jesus then uses those words that are at the heart of Christian belief: **I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die**. Then he challenges Martha, **do you believe this?** She responds positively.
- ✦ The scene changes with the two sisters taking some comfort in Jesus' arrival. I get the sense that John is trying to tell us that the two sisters are responding differently. **She got up quickly and went to him**. The mourners thought that this was their cue to wait at the tomb again and so **they followed her**. The text tells us that **Martha went to meet him** but that **[Martha] knelt at his feet** and she too says, but perhaps with less challenge, **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died**. Jesus is clearly moved and then, uniquely in Scripture, we are told, **Jesus began to weep**.
- ✦ Against all the practical advice of the smell associated with death, **they took away the stone** and Jesus then said simply, **Lazarus, come out**. Then, out he came. In line with the purpose of John's Gospel and not surprisingly, **many....believed in him**.

It isn't in fashion in many Christian Churches to take time to explore what Christians believe about life after death, but it still is a core part of what we hold to be important. As we approach Good Friday we face the reality of death and then as we come to Easter we celebrate the resurrection: resurrection can't be a reality without the genuine experience of death first.

We know that we will all die - and it is important to think about death: while we may not want to make the drama out of it that the Victorians did, as Christians we can face death with confidence and hope. As a priest I have been privileged to help people face up to the imminent reality that they will die - often after a diagnosis that has been dreaded - and then to be with them when they die.

Then what? It isn't enough to hold onto a vague idea that we live on in the memories of those who knew us and loved us: Christians believe that there is a life that continues beyond our life on earth and that this life is lived in God's immediate presence.

Whether with Martha you want to shout at Jesus, or with Mary share a quiet honesty, it is our response to the question Jesus asks that makes a difference to how we live and die. **I am the resurrection and the life.... do you believe this?**