

Resurrecting What Is Dead

Sunday 29th March 2020

Readings: Psalm 130, Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45, Romans 8:6-11

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

Watching the news at the moment is an almost macabre experience. The death toll out of Italy and Spain is nothing less than frightening and day by day we wonder if it will go higher, or like some crazed horror movie if another country, like the US, is going to top it. Who would have thought this a couple of weeks ago? When it was an issue constrained to China we could feel sympathy and concern for the Chinese people but it was a step removed. Day by day disaster has spread, got closer and now, in an incredibly short space of time, it is here. We too are now in isolation and watching with increasing concern at the countries that aren't. How strange too that at this very time we have a set of Biblical texts that in themselves are considered among the strangest of the Biblical texts. The powerful imagery of Ezekiel's Valley of Bones has inspired authors, poets, artists and theologians for centuries. The account of Lazarus' being brought back from the dead by Jesus goes unparalleled in its significance and implications. It is to these texts that we turn this morning.

As Jesus would later be led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested so too, in Ezekiel 37, we find Ezekiel led by God into a scene of desolation for a different type of education. The scene was one of a multitude of skeletons, not one or two but hundreds, thousands, spread out bleaching on the valley floor. These were not any bones Ezekiel knew. They were the bones of the nation of Judah, slaughtered by the Babylonians. Following the death of Solomon and his son David the nation had split in two; to the north, Israel and to the south, Judah. But their destiny was somewhat short-lived. Israel never honoured God and survived a couple of hundred years until, some hundred and fifty years before Ezekiel's time, the Assyrians overran the north and Israel was no more leaving only Judah. Judah made more of an effort to be faithful to God, almost half of the kings served God but increasingly this became more infrequent as evil grew in the nation. Whilst God sent prophet after prophet to warn the people they ignored every message and became as corrupt as the nations around them. Then came the invading Babylonians who made short work of the nation of Judah. If the people refused to listen to God then the nation made its choice. God's protection over them was removed and they were subject to whatever the world or humanity would throw at them or take from them. The punishment of God? Yes. The consequence of their own folly and recklessness? Also yes. The best of what was left of Judah was carried away into slavery in Babylon. The land was left a ransacked, deserted, conquered skeleton with only a few inhabitants that survived the purge.

Ezekiel was led back and forth among the bones. How he must have wondered at what God was doing and been so aware of the folly of his countrymen and what they had lost. All of the potential for a nation that, under Solomon and David, had been the envy of the world, lost and gone. Dried and bleaching upon stony ground. Strip away all the façade and a nation is its people; the nature and quality of the people is what a nation is all about. Judah and Israel had betrayed their heritage, forsaken their God, now there was very little left, the glory of the nation gone. What might Ezekiel have thought ... what now? How can anything good come of this? What of God's promises?

Yet Ezekiel is a fascinating prophet who has some of the most amazing, even bizarre visions and prophetic insights. Now too, we see something here-before unconceptualized. The Lord will put breath into these bones, new flesh, new tendons,

new skin and organs, new everything and then again, His breath, the same breath that had given life to Adam. What God can do is bring life where none is expected, restore hope and purpose and energy where there is none. **“Come breath from the four winds and breath into these slain that they might live.”** What incredible words, more-so, what an incredible action. No, not the resurrection of one, but of many, of thousands, a whole army. As Ezekiel watched the army was reborn.

One can imagine that this is a vision, a graphic metaphor, for what God is going to do. But was it more than that? It is more than just creating a new vision or rebuilding, it is a vision of resurrection, a continuance of the past but in a new, redeemed manner. God is able to do far more than we can ever imagine and the quality of the material that He has to work with is not the issue. The only issue is God’s intent, purpose and economy in the world.

Ezekiel is challenged then: can he see beyond what is right in front of his eyes, to see a better and more glorious future that builds on the past and present, or can he only desolation? Ezekiel acts, he speaks as God commands, once, twice and before his eyes the army is resurrected. An act symbol of what God plans to do.

We switch now to the account of Jesus raising Lazarus. We know that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus. Jesus based His mission work in the area from their house. Mary and Martha were unusual in themselves, being female disciples of the touring Jesus. Being close to Jesus and knowing what He was able to do it is not surprising that they called on Jesus. The raising of their brother Lazarus was a pivotal point in Jesus’ ministry. Raising the dead was not considered one of the Messianic signs, as such, but what Jesus did all but brought it into that category. The narrative is clear enough for us. Lazarus got sick and looked like dying. His sisters sent for Jesus, who, although only a day or so’s walk from their location decided to wait another two days so that He would arrive on the fourth day. Not only was this delay disconcerting for the sisters, waiting in anguish for Jesus to arrive, but also for the disciples. They had left Judah under threat of death from the authorities, yet Jesus wanted to return. Though physically not far to go they crossed a border to a territory directly under the sway of the Sanhedrin. Some disciples saw it as was tantamount to suicide. A little side note here... we see it is the disciple Thomas Didymus, the eight disciple and ever the pragmatist, who says, **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”** Thomas is remembered as a doubter, but in reality, when it came to courage, Thomas was amongst the first to stand with Jesus and put his neck out, as they say.

The Jewish people, to the degree they believed in an afterlife, believed that the soul stayed with the body for three days and after that was gone from earth. A person dead three days could not be resurrected. When Jesus raised Lazarus, even over the protests of his sister that the body would be stinking, Jesus shocked the people more than He had before with a superstitious awe. Who is Jesus that He even has power over life and death? This is One who has the same power that Ezekiel witnesses, one who could raise those well past resurrection, back to life. Only God could do this. There was no way this story was going to be silenced. Death is the one thing over which humanity has no power. We do our best to avoid it, to stop people going there, but ultimately it is our fate as human beings. But what about One for whom this would be no threat, by whose word a person could have everlasting life?

The response of those in power is also worth pondering. They knew before them was someone who was doing what could only come from one source. But were they

concerned? Yes, they were, but not appropriately. All they were concerned about was maintaining their power and position irrespective of the facts and ultimate consequences of their decisions. How much are we seeing this re-enacted in a similar way around the world at the moment. The authorities determined that the way to deal with the problem was to silence the threat. This led to one of the great ironic truth statements of all time. **Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”** How right and how wrong he was.

As we look around us at a world in chaos and fear of what might happen we need to know that all of this is in God’s plan. Not that He brings it about necessarily but rather that it is the expected consequence of human sin, human folly. Prophecy and science have both been saying for years that the world situation right now was coming but spending on arms races, on materialistic gathering, on nationalism on anything but faith has only grown in pace. Like the Israelites and Judans who progressively walked away from God the consequences own themselves. But there is always hope and expectation for those who have faith. God not only brings us through, as He brought the faithful exiles of Judah through, He also brings life and new life, resurrecting what has been before but in newer, better and sometimes surprising ways. Not only that God knows each one of us and our families. He calls us to trust in Him, that in Him all things have purpose and reason and one day we will understand. But for now, we are to be faithful, to be obedient to what God wants of us and to rejoice in the knowledge that His is indeed God of all and the One who can raise dry bones, be they of people, of faith, of courage or of anything else and do something glorious with them. That’s because He is God, our Rock, our Saviour. And, as the apostle Paul so succinctly put it, **“The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.”** This may be indeed not only the season of Lent and Easter but also a period in world history, maybe even a last opportunity, where the faith of so many is resurrected as God does a new thing in the world. Humanity’s action or inaction, has brought us this far, but how far will the walk of faith, with our loving God take us? So, be at peace and look to what our God, the bringer and restorer of life, will do.

Let us pray.

Amen