

5th Sunday in Lent (2020)

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

God of consolation and hope: You breathe life into dry bones and weary souls. Pour your Spirit out upon us that we may face despair and death in the hope of resurrection...

The last month in our Lenten pilgrimage, we journeyed with Jesus as he encounters people and offer them salvation. The readings during Lent all point to Christ's redemptive work, mercifully offering people release from sin and evil.

Lent 5 is the last Sunday before Holy Week starts and so therefore is the crescendo of God's new life that he offers – a clear reference to Easter.

Ezekiel 37 captures the vision of the prophet being taken to a valley full of dry bones, representing Israel. He dialogues with God, and eventually sees the bones coming back to life.

The Gospel reading is the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. In the New Testament reading, Apostle Paul says that true life is lived by the Spirit. It is a beautiful anthology of readings of God's regenerative and redemptive work.

In this time when South Africa is in lockdown because of the coronavirus, we are forced into a desert, a dry valley of isolation, and of potential death. The readings cannot be more apt. It also fits perfectly with the Lenten theme of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness.

We are currently in a metaphorical wilderness, with uncertainty and anxiety, and little hope. God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live... their hope is perished," whereupon he replies, "God, only you know." Ezekiel was honest to admit that his understanding is limited. In the Gospel reading, Martha and Mary displays the same lack of theological understanding, and Jesus therefore makes an epiphanal, self-revelatory statement, claiming divinity: "I AM the resurrection and the life."

For John the Evangelist to record a miracle as a historical fact is quite novel but has the mystagogic purpose of drawing readers into the mystery of God. Last year the sensational media footage of a supposed resurrection caused great controversy. Yet, many regard the establishment in 1948 of the State of Israel and its survival as a political miracle.

But probably the more pressing question for us now when reading the Gospel narrative is why would God allow death to happen? Probably because it signifies the new theological paradigm of baptism and that the emphasis in the sacramental lies on new life, which Jesus centres his discussions around with Nicodemus in the third chapter of John's gospel. Again, the baptismal reference points to the Easter tradition of renewing our baptismal vows.

In baptism, we are forced into death, only to be pulled/rescued from it. The rebirth is perhaps not even voluntary, but by grace, giving us fresh vision and values to live by.

God instructs Ezekiel to speak to death. It is a forced conversation that does not make sense, much perhaps like baptism – we are told to confront it. Paradoxically, Jesus speaks to death, starting by weeping. That is how death is defeated, through our weeping and solidarity. Tears baptise our eyes, metaphorically speaking, giving us new, reborn vision.

In this time of the coronavirus (Covid-19), we are transformed from passive to active citizens in our isolation, in our wilderness. Weeping knows and acts – acting because it is Spirit-filled. This marks the difference between simply a church organization, and the Church as a living body operating despite seemingly stumbling stones and hindrances. It is not just an adaptive body; it is a unit in solidarity with the world. It goes the extra mile even everything seems dead.

When God starts weeping, we can be assured that new revelation and grace will follow. Amen.