

## Year A Lent 5 Passion Sunday

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8: 6-11

Luke 11: 1-45

Passion Sunday. A pivotal point in Lent. Our readings turn to the themes of love, death and resurrection.

In probably the most well-known passage from Ezekiel, we read about a valley full of the dry bones of the whole household of Israel – not just one person as we sometimes picture when we reflect on this passage.

Many of the people of Israel had been forced into exile. They had lost Zion, the land they saw as holy; they had lost the temple, it was now but a pile of stones; they had lost their monarchy – the kings who had guided them both well and badly over the years. They had lost all the most important aspects of their faith. Zion was no longer the home of God and God's chosen people. In other words they were in a theological and existential crisis, a real low point, lower than at any point since they crossed the River Jordan with Joshua as their leader.

And yet, Chapter 11, the vision of a valley full of dry bones is a depiction of hope and promise in the apparent desolation. The dry bones of the people in exile; dry, hopeless, weary people in a foreign land. But God had not forgotten them and did not leave them as dry bones. New life is breathed into them, and they once more they become alive to the possibilities of a life guided by God. God did not leave them.

And today, this reading gives us hope that whilst the life of faith is not without some very real challenges, God does not leave us. God is present with us, and is ready to animate us afresh. Dry bones are definitely not the last word.

In our Epistle reading Paul describes the dual nature of humanity and of all human beings. The two counter-posed mindsets of flesh and Spirit. Flesh is Paul's shorthand or label to describe humankind's default way of living. Immersed in worldly concerns, driven by our own ego and our interests; our self-interests of course. Paul sees this as leading to death, both spiritual and physical, and also death of community where people care and have compassion for one another. Paul says in verse 8 that 'those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.'

Living in the Spirit is what Paul urges us to strive towards, each and every day of our lives. To live a life focussed on following the ways of Jesus, bringing glimpses of God's kingdom to our friends, our enemies, our neighbours, neighbours both near and far. Living in the Spirit calls us to live a life of love, compassion and peace; that deep peace of shalom which the Spirit wishes to animate within us, whereby we have God's love at our core and act like a beacon of that peace, love and compassion to others.

Paul preaches of hope; in following the way of Jesus, that we can live a life marked by compassion, love and with no condemnation. As we take on the Spirit's attributes, the Spirit's mindset if you will, a whole new way of living is possible. Taking root within us, the Spirit is able to equip and shape us to live and act in ways that please God, using Jesus as our pattern and guide.

So how is it that we can get caught up in living a life in the flesh? Of getting caught up in patterns of speech and behaviour that include condemnation of others, of making conscious or unconscious decisions to stray, and through our speech and behaviour find that we condemn ourselves?

How can I, how can we, change habits, change attitudes, change thoughts, that impact on how I relate to others?

My personal response to this challenge of the flesh and the Spirit that Paul so rightly says goes on within us all, is:

Firstly, to continue to read the gospels and seek to follow the ways of Jesus, who came not to condemn but to save, and then through worship and prayer turn to our Triune God for forgiveness and for resurrection as I seek to die to my fleshly ways and live a new life each and every day.

Secondly, the Ignatian approach to holding a time of prayer and reflection called a Daily Examen<sup>i</sup>, a discipline that helps me keep on the same way as Jesus. A daily time to make corrections and note habits and ways of thinking and acting that are not of the Spirit.

And now I want to turn to the gospel reading – the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel is a major pivotal moment for Jesus, as described by John. In the first ten chapters John described some of the signs and wonders Jesus did. In Chapter 11, there is one last sign, the seventh one, and what a sign it was and is! Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Chapter 11 starts the second part of John's gospel where the focus is on God's glory.

In verse four, on hearing that Lazarus was ill, Jesus says that his illness will not end in death: No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified

through it. And in verse 40 just before they rolled the stone back from Lazarus' tomb, Jesus says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

In chapter 11 we get a very different sense of Jesus... a very human and emotional Jesus.

Verse three tells us that Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, saying, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.' This uses the Greek word, '*Philia*' meaning a fondness, a brotherly love.

Verse five tells us that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. The Greek word used for love is 'agape', meaning the unconditional love God has for all of God's children, or as Thomas Aquinas put it, 'to will the good for another'.

In Verses 33 to 35 we have a deeply emotional scene, of Jesus seeing Mary weeping along with all the other mourners, and Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And then we have the stunning short sentence. 'Jesus wept'. A display of Jesus' humanity and the impact of the relationships he had built up over the life of his ministry had not been portrayed in the gospel until this point.

For me, this passage is a welcome insight into the humanity of Jesus, to show us how he was impacted by the relationships he developed, and how he related to the sorrows of those grieving the loss of a brother, a neighbour, a productive member of his community at Bethany.

On Thursday we held the funeral for Tilly Suttle. It was a time of sadness and grieving, for a lady who may have been a doubter in her faith but who invested so much energy and passion into supporting her community, to make it a better place for those less fortunate than herself. It was lovely that Neville could record his tribute for Tilly, and that everyone could hear it loud and clear in church. It was a time for tears, just as Jesus tears flowed over Lazarus and his grieving family. It was also a time of hope, of sensing all the good she had done being carried forward by others, and by Jesus' promise of a resurrected life.

Our readings today speak of hope, of resurrection, of being able to live not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. Of the challenges of enabling the Spirit to lead us into new ways of living. Of following the way of Jesus, with tears as well as shouts of joy. And let us pray for Neville, for Theresa and Karen, as they grieve the death of Tilly, and pray they may know God's love at work through all those supporting them at this time and as Karen and Theresa care for Neville as he journeys with his cancer diagnosis. And may we, ever mindful of our

mortality, seek to follow Christ afresh each day, guided by the Spirit of love, of compassion, and of peace.

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<sup>i</sup> In Ignatius of Loyola's own words, but translated into English, the General Examen contains five points:

"Point One: To give thanks to God for the benefits received

Point Two: To ask for grace to know one's sins and reject them

Point three: To ask an account of one's soul from the hour of rising to the present examen, hour by hour, or from one period to another, first about thoughts, then about words and finally about deeds, following the order given in the particular examen

Point Four: To ask God our Lord for pardon for sins

Point Five: To determine to do better with His grace, ending with an Our Father"

*From 'Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Personal Writings', published by Penguin Classics, 1996, London.*

A modern take on the steps to take to complete a daily Examen is:

1. **Become aware of the presence of God:** Ask the Holy Spirit to walk you through the events of your day.
2. **Review the day with a lens of gratitude:** Look at your day with a focus on gratitude and the gifts and joys you received from God throughout the day. How did God work through people and circumstances to bring you joy? What did you see? What food did you eat? God is present within the little moments of our days.
3. **Focus on your emotions:** What feelings did you experience throughout your day? Our emotions can help us recognize the Holy Spirit working in our lives. There are lots of emotions we can experience in a day: anger, joy, frustration, contentment, etc. Use the Daily Examen to let God show you where you fell short and focus on the emotions surrounding those moments. What do these feelings indicate on a deeper level? Is there someone who keeps crossing your mind? God might be prompting you to reach out to them.
4. **Choose a moment from your day and pray with it:** Pray for the Holy Spirit to show you a particular moment from your day and examine it with God. What is He trying to show you through this moment? As you ponder this moment, let the Holy Spirit move within you to inspire a prayer about it.
5. **Look toward tomorrow:** Ask God for the strength and grace needed for the next day. Walk through what you will have going on, and pay attention to how this makes you feel. Let these feelings turn into a prayer, and ask for God's guidance in your day.