

Year A, Lent 5 /Passion Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2026  
Ezekiel 37:1-14. Psalm 130. Romans 8:6-11. John 11: 1-45

When I preached on this passage six years ago, and I haven't preached on it since, it was just after the start of COVID – and doesn't that now feel a lifetime ago – when the world was turned upside down with no-one knowing how things were going to pan out. Right now, we are in the midst of turmoil where again the outlook is both dangerous and uncertain.

And yet.

The two main readings today both speak to the possibility of new life in dry, barren places. And we see reminders of that in small ways all around us even now as our gardens emerge from hibernation, as the daffodils replace the snowdrops as the focal point of attention and the days get longer –and hopefully warmer. This time of year reminds us that, however much we humans make a mess of things, nature's cycle of death followed by new life is inexorable.

In today's Psalm the psalmist cries Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. There are people echoing that cry today all around the world, but especially in places like Palestine, Iran and Ukraine. God are you listening to us? Can you hear the cries from the refugee camps, the cries of those fleeing from violence and war? The cries of those trapped in barren places?

For many people at the moment crying out to God seems to be all that's left. Yet God rarely responds with the speed that they, and we, would want.

But before I turn to that, I want to say a few words about the Ezekiel passage that Alan read for us.

One of the best-known passages in the Old Testament. Ezekiel has his vision of the dry, desiccated dead bones in the arid valley pointing to the fate of Israel after it fell to the might of Babylon.

God gives him a fresh vision, a promise that God will breathe new life into Israel, life after death. The Israelites might feel their bones were all dried up and their situation was hopeless. That's not the case God says. I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.

Not only did he do that for the exiles, he does exactly the same in our Gospel reading where Jesus brings life to Lazarus after death. And it foreshadows what will happen after the Cross where Jesus will find himself almost days later.

Turning to the question of how quickly God responds, it's fair to say we don't like waiting. With almost any issue we bring to God in prayer we want an instant and positive response – just as Martha and Mary had wanted Jesus to come instantly in response to their message that their brother Lazarus was seriously ill.

And yet – Jesus tarried. In fact Jesus waited so long that Lazarus had been dead four days when he got to Bethany, so long, that in Jewish understanding of death, his soul had left his body. Why? After all Lazarus, Mary and Martha are the only three named individuals in the Bible that Jesus loved.

Yes, we know that Jesus loved the disciples generically, including the so-called beloved disciple, who is assumed to be John, but it would appear from the Gospels that it was those three that had a special place in his heart.

So why did Jesus wait? Was it just so that the glory of God would be revealed. I don't think so, even if revealing the glory of God was more important than any other factor. If Jesus had gone straight to Bethany and done what Martha, Mary and the crowd all wanted, i.e. healed Lazarus, for them it would have just been yet another example of Jesus doing his thing – another case of instant healing. What would they have learned from it? Nothing of value, really. All it would have achieved was that Jesus would have avoided the almost explicit accusation that Lazarus' death was his fault.

Yet it is often in the waiting, the time in the desert, the period when God feels absent – and let's face it we have all endured periods like that, I certainly have, that we learn the most and grow the most.

Only a few days ago, Markie and I were reading our regular devotional where the author felt God was ignoring his prayers yet very clearly felt God say to him that He, God, had turned his face away from him 'for a little while'. The writer said he actually found that comforting because it told him that, rather like Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's slave, he had been 'seen' by God and that was enough.

One of things I value about the Lazarus story is that I think it shows Jesus at his most human anywhere in the Gospels, ahead of his time in Gethsemane. At times it can feel as if Jesus' patience, his frequent refusal to condemn moral failings are almost too good to be true, that his divinity outweighs his humanity. Yet this is the only recorded time that Jesus actually weeps and to me it feels like the one occasion when his humanity trumps his divinity.

I think he wept for two reasons – the first was that he knew he had made his friends suffer for a greater purpose, and secondly was because he knew the inevitable consequence of what he was doing – that nothing could now stop the trajectory that would end on the Cross.

We have to remember that Jesus was a Marmite figure. Every time he comforted the have-nots, he threatened the haves, the ones with power and influence. As far as the haves were concerned, raising Lazarus was a step too far, the final straw. It was after this latest sign, as John would put it, that they decided Jesus had to die.

When Jesus does eventually arrive in Bethany, although Martha is fed up with him, she still assumes that Jesus can fix the situation, even if that means resurrection at the last day.

Which prompts Jesus' response of a promise of new life, not just for Lazarus, but also for us, in one of his major I AM sayings – I AM the resurrection and the life. Not, 'I will be'.

What is he trying to tell us? First, that we don't have to wait until after our death for the promise of eternal life, that it's available to us right now when we truly put our trust in God. Second, that resurrection and the full and abundant life that Jesus promises go together. As Paul tells us vividly when we are in Christ, our old self is put to death and we become a new creation.

We can't have that full life without the resurrection, because resurrection isn't some abstract theology that I can explain satisfactorily, resurrection is fundamentally about relationship with God, it's about now.

I want to finish by drawing your attention to something that can escape our notice – and it's this. Lazarus's resurrection is not complete when he walks out of the tomb.

To complete what Jesus started required the involvement of everyone present – and by extension us.

It's not so much that God needs us to be able to complete his work of resurrection. Clearly he doesn't, he could have unbound Lazarus himself.

Rather he invited the onlookers to get involved in God's work, not just to be passive witnesses. And that is as true today for us as it was for them then. We are invited to be changed by God's action in our lives. God does the miracle, but we are given our part to play as it unfolds

Unbind him and let him go, he says. You see Lazarus is both free and bound at the same time.

And that's us isn't it? We are Lazarus. We are free because we are redeemed by God's love, yet also imprisoned by our weaknesses and our insecurities, our addictions, our prejudices, you name it.

And Jesus makes it plain to us – this is a partnership you know, you have got a part to play. And it's not an easy one. As Martha says in the King James translation, 'But Lord He Stinketh'.

It's as if we, like Lazarus, have emerged from the tomb but kept our rotting death clothes on. How many of us have accepted the offer to come out but not found the promised freedom?

You can sort of imagine the response of someone facing the prospect of being unbound. Honestly, it's all right, I don't want to make a fuss, I'll just put some clean baggy clothes over the top of what I am wearing and hope nobody notices.

Or if we are the ones being asked to do the unbinding. Hang on a moment, actually no thanks they stinketh, I might catch something. We'll just Febreze them and they'll be fine.

All of us I would suggest need to reflect regularly just how willing we are to unbind others and how willing we are to make ourselves vulnerable by allowing others to unbind our own dirty death clothes so that everyone can fully enjoy the life Jesus came to give us.