

Sermon - darkness and new life

Using readings: Ezekiel 37.1–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6–11; John 11.1–45

Death, and new life

- Today's readings speak directly into the current circumstances that our parish finds itself in.
- Ezekiel has a vision that is initially grotesque: a valley full of bones - very dry bones - that turn back into being lifeless bodies, that in turn are filled once again with the *ruach* - the breath or Spirit of God.
- The vision ends with a message of hope of new life in the Lord.
- The psalmist calls out of the depths - the depths, perhaps, of darkness, of despair, or of death - and goes on to reassure those who recite this prayer poem:

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for him:
and in his word is my hope. (Psalm 130.5)*

- Paul reassures us in his letter to the Romans:
If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8.11)
- And John's Gospel tells the story of the death of Lazarus, the grieving of his family and friends, and the hope of the resurrection to new life that Jesus brings about.

Acknowledge the situation

- In each of these readings, in different ways, there is firstly an acknowledgement of an unhappy situation, and then there is a message of hope.
- If we refuse to acknowledge any unhappiness in our current circumstances then we don't really need hope, or we can't say the prayer of the psalmist with any real meaning:

*O Israel, trust in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy:
and with him is ample redemption. (Psalm 130.7)*

- So let us first acknowledge the current unhappiness in our parish community.
- We have some issues in our parish which are not new.
- Some people think it is because of gatekeepers.
- Gatekeepers are those who, below the surface, are anxious and fearful of change.
- They tend to manage their fear and anxiety by trying to control any progress or constructive change in the parish.
- Many churches attract gatekeepers, but usually their leadership teams work together to minimise their negative impact.
- However, the difference at St John's is that the leadership team has not worked together to manage the impact of gatekeepers here.
- And as some gatekeepers have left, and some of their enablers have left, so new gatekeepers and new enablers have stepped up.
- So we need to ask: why does the culture of St John's keep on tolerating this behaviour?

Uncomfortable images

- We come together each Sunday to offer up praise and thanksgiving, to be nurtured through Word and sacrament, and encouraged through our shared fellowship.
- But even as we do so, some of us might regard our parish community to be in a dark and unhappy place at this time.
- We might see ourselves like the grotesque valley full of bones, and like the tomb of Lazarus that stinks.
- These are uncomfortable images, so I wouldn't be surprised if some of you wanted to disagree with me.

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- However, a number of parishioners have indeed been experiencing disunity and unhappiness as a direct consequence of the gatekeepers.
- But God has given a word of hope for us, both as individuals, and as a community.

Thomas

- Apart from Jesus, the first person in today's Gospel story that we should look to emulate is courageous Thomas.
- After the disciples remind Jesus that the religious Jews in Jerusalem have already tried to stone him, and Jesus indicates that he is still determined to go there, Thomas says to the other disciples, '*Let us also go, that we may die with him*' (John 11.16).
- This commitment to willingly enter an uncomfortable and dangerous situation in support of Jesus was a courageous decision.
- I'm not surprised that he also looked for support from the others.
- There are times when we need to be prepared to enter into uncomfortable situations, that might even feel dangerous, and we need support from others when doing so.
- Nevertheless, like those first disciples, we can have the assurance that we are doing so *with* Jesus.

Martha

- The second person we encounter is thoughtful Martha.
- Martha's faith is genuine, but she seems to have a limited perspective at times.
- Jesus tries to assure her that her brother will rise again, but while he means now, in this lifetime, Martha can only think in terms of resurrection on the last day - that end of time concept, when somehow everything comes to an end.
- Even when Jesus gives the instruction to roll away the stone covering the tomb, Martha is still focused on the reality of her brother's death, rather than on the reality of the resurrection.
- I think many of us have the same kind of faith as Martha - genuine, but limited to what we think we know, or what we can see immediately in front of us.
- Perhaps it would benefit us to recognise where we limit our faith, so that we can really see how Jesus is actually at work in our lives, and in the life of our church.
- If we acknowledged that our faith relationship with God can still grow further, then we might be able to engage better with the new life that Jesus makes real - both in our personal lives, and in the life of St John's.

Mary

- The third person we encounter with Jesus is emotional Mary.
- Mary has few words, and serves mainly to be a focus of felt grief.
- Maybe it is the action of Jesus we need to consider at this point.
- Even though Jesus had intentionally delayed before going to Bethany, with the premonition that Lazarus' death would lead to God's glory, and even though he was able to reassure the women of their brother's imminent resurrection, nevertheless he entered into and shared the grief of that situation.
- Maybe we should model ourselves on Jesus in this story, and be prepared to acknowledge and engage with the unhappiness of others.
- Are we prepared to do so for others in our own parish - to be like Jesus and weep with them as they share their pain or distress or felt injustice?
- Or maybe when we are the ones in distress or some unhappiness, maybe we need to see where Jesus is weeping with us, perhaps through others who share in our distress.

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Lazarus

- The fourth person we encounter doesn't say anything at all, but makes a decisive response.
- Lazarus is in the dark place, and is bound with the grave clothes of death.
- Jesus' voice wakes him: '*Lazarus, come out!*' (John 11.43)
- Lazarus could have chosen to stay in the darkness, like some people who surprisingly do not want new life.
- I have a relative who for many years could only focus on the death of her child from an accident.
- Her other children grew up and married, and her husband retired, but she did not participate in the life of the rest of her family until she finally realised that she had been missing out on being alive herself.
- Engaging with new life means engaging with change, and with taking responsibility for one's actions - and some people don't like change, even if it's a good change, and don't like being responsible for their actions.
- For such people it would be far easier to stay in the darkness, and to ignore the call of Jesus.
- But Lazarus *does* respond, and comes out of the place of death.
- He still needs others to help to release him from the things that bind him, but he puts himself in the light, and trusts others to help him.
- I suggest that there are times when as individuals, or perhaps now as a faith community, we find ourselves in a dark place, and feel bound by things that are life-draining.
- However, if we can acknowledge that we are in a dark place, and respond to the call of Jesus telling us to step out into the light, then maybe we can allow ourselves to be released from the things that bind us.

The gatekeepers

- There is a final group of people who appear on the sidelines of this story, but who afterwards meet together with the chief priests.
- These are the gatekeepers in this story. In their discussions they state:
'This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, '*You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'* ... So from that day on they planned to put [Jesus] to death. (John 11.47b-50, 53)
- In their fear and anxiety they cannot engage with the new life that Jesus brings.
- During the course of Holy week, starting from next Sunday, Palm Sunday - the Church will be remembering the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus makes as he engages directly with that fear and anxiety, and continues to manifest God's love and light, even on the cross.
- And then on Easter Day we will celebrate again the new life that Jesus embodies in his own self.
- So as we offer up those aspects of our own lives, and of our community at St John's - those aspects that are unlovely, or dark, or life-draining -
- may you acknowledge the reality of the gatekeepers amongst us, and their fear of not being able to control the work of God;
- may you have the courage of Thomas and the faithfulness of Martha;
- may you be like Jesus engaging with Mary's grief, and like Mary whose grief was shared by Jesus;
- and most of all, may you be like Lazarus, and respond to the call of Jesus, to step out into his light and experience life anew.

In His name. Amen.