

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent – Jane Brough

In our first reading from Ezekiel Israel has lost hope. They say that their bones have dried up. But Ezekiel has a vision of God taking these bones, clothing them with flesh and breathing life into them. A message of hope for a hopeless people. This inspirational vision would have meant little if Ezekiel had failed to follow through with his part, to take God's message on to his people.

God can breathe life into the driest of lives and souls. His spirit can set us free from the things that sap our energy and hope so that we can live and so that we can be the people he made us to be.

In December 1939, Britain was experiencing the early, dark days of the second World War. As part of his Christmas broadcast King George 6th offered these words written in 1902 by the American social scientist and poet Minnie Louise Haskins:-

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!" So, I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night."

Mary and Martha have sent an urgent message to Jesus telling him of Lazarus' sickness and urging him to come to them. Jesus delays his visit to Mary and Martha for two days, telling his disciples that Lazarus' illness will not lead to death but is rather for the glory of God. Wounded by Jesus' apparent failure to appreciate the urgency of the situation, Martha cannot contain her grief and distress. She goes out to meet Jesus and is unable to disguise her pain and frustration. "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus' reply is brisk and to the point. "Your brother will rise again." Martha answers with a generalised statement of belief that her brother will rise again on the last day, eliciting a blunt response from Jesus. He confronts her with the narrow limitations of her belief and challenges her to trust him and to move "into the darkness beyond." I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

Jesus' knowledge and understanding of Martha's character led him to shape his challenge in a way which is exactly right for her, opening the way for her triumphant assertion "Yes Lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the World".

Mary's opening words to Jesus are exactly the same as her sisters, but his response to her is very different. Seeing her distress and the distress of the Jews who were supporting her "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved". After asking to be shown where Lazarus had been buried, Jesus himself began to weep, mourning the death of his friend.

And John's Gospel leaves us in no doubt about the actual, physical death of Lazarus. When Jesus eventually arrived, we are told that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus commanded that the stone be moved away from the tomb. When Martha objected, saying that there would be a stench after such time, it brought forth a rebuke from Jesus. "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the Glory of God?"

For everyone involved in the Lazarus event, this is strange, awe-inspiring territory. The other Gospels also record miracles, where Jesus raised people from the dead, Jairus' daughter in Matthew:9, the son of the widow of Nain in Luke:7 but there is something about this raising to life which moves us into a new dimension, one that prefigures the dying and raising of Christ himself.

Throughout this Gospel narrative, individuals and groups within it are challenged to take a leap of faith and "go out into the darkness" of this unknown territory trusting that the God whom Jesus calls "father" is able to transform their darkness into light, despair into hope and death into light.

The raising of Lazarus, foreshadowing the resurrection of Christ is for us a symbol of all those deep, dark places of our experience where hope seems absent and we are tempted to despair.

In her book 'Gateway to Hope', Maria Boulding speaks for all of us:

"As we teeter on the edge of despair, beset by every kind of temptation and feeling as though we had already fallen, the spirit is released. This is his own place, the deepest place of our being where he is wedded to our spirit, where he can act and give life, where he can free us from all that hampers the true thrust of our will. Entombed Lazarus is a sign of each one of us. In this hopeless situation, where you are nothing but stark failure, you know the miracle of grace. The tomb is the place of resurrection and if you believe, you will see the Glory of God. Amen