

Lent 5 – Wesley 10.30am – 6th April 2014

Theme: “The hope of new life”

Readings: John 11:1-3 & 17-45 ‘Lazarus is raised’
Ezekiel 37:1-14 ‘Vision of hope for Israel’

Introduction

We have two dramatic readings for today from different worlds, so to speak, and we bring them into our world as we journey in Lent with Jesus, heading towards the cross.

In Ezekiel we have the vision of dry bones coming to life and in John 11 the story of Lazarus being brought back to life by Jesus. Both stories come from a dark, distressed place and then find new life, new hope where previously there was none.

There is this Biblical theme of darkness to light, from death to life that has been coming constantly through our Lectionary readings.

Last week it was the man born blind that is healed by Jesus. But there was far deeper significance there. It was the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees contrasted with the new found spiritual sight of the man born blind. The irony of those who thought they had spiritual sight but were in fact spiritually blind. Let us now take a closer look at both the Ezekiel and John passages and see the significance for ourselves.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 “The valley of the dry bones come back to life”

The starting point for this vision is found in verse 11b:

“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”

A portion of the people of Israel have been transported to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC and their whole world destroyed and their faith deeply questioned. Originally they thought, Yahweh, their God, would protect and care for them but from their perspective this had not happened. Here, in this vision, they see their abject hopelessness. They are like an army that has been slaughtered and their bones are left to be bleached by the sun in the valley where they were killed. This is a physical description of their alienation from their land; it is a spiritual description of their alienation from their God; it is a lament for the intolerable situation in which they find themselves. Yet into this bizarre and horrific picture there is a word of hope symbolized by the word pictures of the bones reattaching, the tendons and the skin reforming and finally life literally being breathed into these refurbished bodies. Both here and in the Gospel it sounds like a scene out of a sci-fi film around zombies but here it is God giving fresh life again. The ‘ruach’, the breath or life-giving wind and presence of God again gives hope to a demoralised people, far from home. Here we have a picture of bringing back life to a community that thought it was dead. It is resurrected, in a sense, only by the gift of life, the breath of God, breathed into them. Here is a profound message for the church community today. Life is breathed into us, as a gift from God and not through our own actions. Too often we want to own the work of God and disown God when things go wrong for us! A thought for us to ponder as we travel with Jesus through Lent.

John 11: 1-3 & 17-45 “Lazarus raised”

Here we have the last of the 7 signs in John’s Gospel. The raising of Lazarus marks a turning point in the narrative concerning the one who is the resurrection and the life. Appearing only in John, this episode functions as a narrative bridge connecting Jesus’ public ministry with the events related to the final Passover and Jesus’ death and resurrection. Like much of the rest of this Gospel, the passage points repeatedly to the importance of the act believing in the identity of Jesus and in his power to bring life out of death. The result of this seventh sign, whatever you may make of it, is twofold – it leads people to believe in him (vs 45)

- It accelerates the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities (vss 47-53)

Several points stood out to me in this passage as I re-read it:

1. When Jesus heard the news 'he stayed where he was two more days'. We would find this amazing as in our instant world we would expect people to phone, email, facebook, skype and do it immediately. Jesus took his time. God's timing is not always our timing and possibly this is something we can learn from this passage in our Lent journeying.
2. We read 'On Jesus' arrival Lazarus had already been in the tomb 4 days'. No doubting that the fact of his death.
3. Jesus has a faith conversation with Martha before going with Mary to the tomb. Martha moves from the traditional view of resurrection on the last day to the fact of actively believing that Jesus 'is the resurrection and the life'. Here is an active faith statement . She says; "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who has come into the world". (vs 27)
4. The shortest verse in the Bible; "Jesus wept." (vs 35) Did he weep for his dead friend Lazarus? Did he weep because of the grief of Mary and seeing her weep? Did he weep because of the disbelief of the Pharisees? Did he weep because he knew this was going to happen to him shortly? Here we have the Greek word for 'quiet tears' and he probably wept for his friends but was mindful of the other events.
5. The story reaches a climax as Jesus prays at the tomb and then calls Lazarus out. Literally there is a releasing of the bonds of death here as Jesus tells the people present to unwrap the strips of linen from Lazarus.

Whatever your thoughts on the literal or parable like nature of this event are, I find through this passage a new freedom offered to Lazarus, his sisters, the community and the wider community.

Veronica Miles writing on this passage in the book "Feasting on the Word" writes:

"Releasing persons and communities from the clutches of death also demands something of us, as did Lazarus' resurrection of his community. Though Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he urged those who were alive and well to; "Unbind him and let him go." Resurrected women, men and children today also require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; to remove the graveclothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss and grief, so that unbound women, men and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world" (page 144)

Here we have Jesus at the tomb of a friend, such a short time before being interred himself. Here we are reminded both of who Jesus is and what he can do. With Jesus we are called to stand at the tomb of the suffering and the pained, listening for the voice of Jesus, ready to unbind those whom God delivers, even now.

Conclusion

Just this past week I heard two wonderful stories from people outside the church but looking in upon us. One was the love, care and prayer being given by church members to some-one in hospital. The second was about our Wesley Fete saying what a great community we must have because she saw the love and community spirit at work in those working at the fete. She said it was the best fete she had attended because of the attitude of the people. As we journey with Jesus may we bring light into even the darkest of moments and may we affirm with Martha:

"I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world."
Amen