

**Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's Wimbledon,
5th Sunday of Lent, 2nd April 2017.**

One thing is certain in life from the time of our birth is that one day we will die. Both readings today are about death but also about new life and hope for the future.

Some of us this year may be only too aware of the pain of bereavement following the death of a friend or close relative. Certainly the horror of violent death has been brought home to us all following the killing of innocent people in Westminster and the awful pictures of the bombing of homes in Syria. Yes we are never far from death.

When I first read the reading from Ezekiel - *the Valley of the Dry bones*, the words of the well-known Spiritual song came into my head:

" *Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
now hear the word of the Lord.*"

But the crucial line is in the chorus:

"Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again..."

For Ezekiel the bones represented the whole House of Israel. His prophetic mission had been to warn the House of Israel of coming ruin. Ezekiel himself had been an exile in Babylon. He lived among the people. The dry bones were a symbol of his deceased nation. But God had not rejected his people. Ezekiel in his vision sees these dry bones coming to life, being filled by the breath of God. They were to receive God's life-giving spirit. They had new life to live again.

In contrast our Gospel reading is about one man who died named Lazarus, Jesus' friend. It is only John's Gospel that records this story of Lazarus. Let us put ourselves in the story as either Martha or Mary, or perhaps one of the mourners. Neither of the sisters understood why Jesus had not rushed to Bethany when he had been told that Lazarus was very ill. Jesus made the comment:

"This illness does not lead to death rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it".

The disciples could not understand what Jesus meant at that time.

However, the time was not right for Jesus to go to visit Lazarus, and in fact he waited two more days . Jesus knew that Lazarus would be dead when he got to Bethany.

At the same time Jesus' disciples were concerned about the reaction of the Jews, who had tried to stone Jesus, if he went on a journey. Nevertheless Jesus set out on his journey to Bethany.

We can imagine how despairing and angry Martha and Mary were that Jesus, Lazarus' friend, had not responded to the message of his illness. Now it was too late, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Popular belief was that the soul and body separated after three days with no hope of resuscitation.

Impatient Martha went out from her house to greet Jesus and rebuked him with the words :

"Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died ."

Martha misunderstood Jesus 'words of comfort;

"...Your brother will rise again"...

thinking that Jesus referred to the Resurrection on the last day. She was not comforted by this statement and although Martha said she believed in Jesus as the Messiah, I'm not certain that she understood what Jesus' next words meant;

" I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?..."

How could Martha understand what these words meant? How difficult it is for us to understand what these words mean today, despite the quotation being familiar. These words are often used at the beginning of funeral services.

Jesus reached Bethany and met Mary, Martha's sister, and again she echoed her words:

"...Lord if you have been here, my brother would not have died..."

Jesus was so distressed he joined Martha in weeping over the death of Lazarus and we are told that :

" Jesus was greatly disturbed as he came to the tomb".

Nevertheless , Jesus, although showing his humanity by the shedding of tears, as he approached the tomb he was in command of the situation and ordered the stone in front of the tomb to be removed. Jesus' time had now come. Jesus said to Martha:

"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God".

What a dramatic moment! Despite the horror of the mourners at the prospect of the tomb being opened Jesus disregarded their concerns. At this point Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father :

"Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me".

Then Jesus cried with a loud voice:

"Lazarus, come out!"

What would we have thought if we had been Martha, Mary, or one of the other mourners standing there at the entrance to the tomb? Horror? Distaste? Hope? Belief in Jesus' words?

To everyone's amazement Lazarus came out of the tomb, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in cloth. Jesus said to them:

" ... Unbind him, and let him go...."

Lazarus is released from death to new life. As Jesus' death and resurrection will release us from sin to new life. The Glory of God has been revealed through Jesus. We are told that because of what Jesus had done many of the Jews who had come with Martha and Mary believed in Jesus. And perhaps too Martha and Mary would begin to understand what Jesus meant by his words:

“I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

We may wonder how Jesus knew that Lazarus would come back to life. Tom Wright in his commentary on John’s Gospel suggests that during the days when Jesus appeared to be wasting time, before he set out for Bethany, he was in fact devoting the days to prayer. Jesus was communicating with God, his heavenly Father, in order to receive the divine help that he needed to bring Lazarus forth from the tomb, and so to show forth the Glory of God. Jesus too must have been very conscious of his own impending death.

Tom Wright goes on to say that:

We should remember that in this story the unspoken clue to it all was **prayer and faith**. If Jesus needed to spend time in praying and waiting, how much more will we?

Amen