

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 22nd March 2026, i.e. Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Each Tuesday evening in Lent a small group of us have been meeting in church to “walk the way of the Cross”. This act of worship, called the “Stations of the Cross”, is an ancient Christian contemplative practice. Essentially it's a tour of Jesus' final journey through Jerusalem. The aim is to know Jesus better, and to love him more. I also think that imagining ourselves into Jesus' suffering equips us for life in the world in ways that we can't predict.

We always begin Stations of the Cross with some words from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus tells his disciples,

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?' [Matthew 16:24-26]

We read these words on a Sunday later in the year [Proper 17], but it's worth keeping them close by over the next few weeks. Notice how Jesus doesn't say that those who lose their life for his sake will “save” it; rather, he contrasts losing your life with “finding” it [v. 25]. That life is something we need to find implies that we don't really “have” our lives yet; true life is not a default condition of human beings, it's something we need to work on.

I mention this because our Gospel reading today is also about finding life. Here, as in that Matthew passage I've just quoted, life is not the default: for Lazarus and for his sisters death is the default; death is what happens when Jesus isn't there.

I realise the Gospel today was long and emotionally complex, but in some ways it was frustratingly short. What we read ended on an artificially happy note: in verse forty-five the Evangelist says that many of the Jews who came with Mary saw what Jesus did and believed in him; and that's where we stopped. But the next verse says that other people saw the same thing and reported it to the

Pharisees, who took it to the chief priests and the rest of the council. And together they plot to put Jesus to death [John 11:46-53]. So Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead seems to be the trigger for his own execution.

Jesus' death is a political execution. The Romans agreed to kill him because he presented them with a political problem, he was claiming to be a king. At the same time, the leaders of God's people, especially Caiaphas the High Priest, discerned correctly that, however amazing Jesus was, he had no intention of giving them independence from the Romans. The life that Jesus offers is not freedom from suffering or from national defeat. You might say that the resurrection of the dead is politically useless – if by politics, you mean the success of this or that party, this or that regime, this or that nation. The horizon of God's politics is both too close and too distant to be of use to the council.

I'll say that again: the horizon of God's politics is both too close and too distant to be of use. Let me explain what I mean by that. Ezekiel shows us how distant God's horizons are, in comparison with ours. This reading from Ezekiel chapter thirty-seven isn't really about the resurrection of the dead, as a theological concept. There is that of course; but putting flesh on dry bones, and breathing life back into lifeless bodies, is really a symbol of national restoration. As the Lord says to Ezekiel,

I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and *I will bring you back to the land of Israel...* I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and *I will place you on your own soil...* [Ezekiel 37:12, 14]

Resurrection here stands for the end of exile, the return of God's people to their own soil. The miracle is a political miracle, in which God gives hope to a community that had lost its hope. But the implications of this are much greater than they seem. Another prophet, speaking centuries later, echoes Ezekiel when he says that God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones themselves [Matthew 3:9]. This is what I mean when I say that God's horizons are much more distant than ours: God has the power to bring life out of death, to bring something out of nothing [Romans 4:17]. So who knows, at the end of the day, what the destiny of any nation will be? Even defeat and exile isn't the end.

God's horizons are much more distant than ours. At the same time, God's horizons are also very close. One of the special insights of Christianity is that God wants to transform and free individual people. That's the force of some of Jesus' best-loved parables: God goes out of his way to seek the

lost, the one who is dying in their sins. That's also what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans. Romans chapter seven is an intensely personal reflection on the way that sin traps and enslaves us; Romans eight, which we read from earlier, is all about life in the Spirit.

...if Christ is in you [he says], though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [Romans 8:10]

That is to say, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who makes us righteous. This is personal transformation; and the resurrection language here stands for freedom: through the Spirit God will give you life; not just the physical life of a body with breath in it, but the spiritual life of righteousness.

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Caiaphas the High Priest sees Jesus as a problem, and prophesies that Jesus will die to save the nation. With the eyes of faith, we can see that Caiaphas has got things round the wrong way. In fact, the problem that really needs solving is our lack of hope. And Jesus gives us the only good answer to that.

Scapegoating reveals how divided and anxious the human heart is. Only someone who has forgotten how connected they are to their neighbour can consider sacrificing their neighbour. Only someone whose hands and feet and eyes are bound by sins can assume that their condition is one of life and freedom. This is the problem to which Jesus Christ is the solution.

Jesus is not really the perfect sacrifice, despite what some theologians say. A sacrifice is only really good for killing; Jesus does so much more than just die. Jesus comes and breathes the Holy Spirit into our dry and despairing hearts. He calls to us from a place of deep compassion and invites us to come out, to find our life and to walk with him.

May the power of your love, Lord Christ,
fiery and sweet,
so absorb our hearts
as to withdraw them from everything under heaven;
grant that we may be ready
to die for love of your love,
as you died for love of our love. Amen.