Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 22nd March 2026

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Lent V

The family are gathered around the graveside, and the minister reads from 1 Cor 15, 'Where, O death, is your sting?' One of the family looks up and scans the worn, sad faces, takes in the surrounding headstones, and says 'Where, O death is your sting? Why, it's just about everywhere seeing as you asked.' So a short story by the American writer Annie Dillard. Just about everywhere – in the body bags of the war dead, in the schools bombed by accident, in slums and favellas as disease and malnourishment run riot, on the A14 as accident statistics pile up, in the hospital and hospice as end of life care quietly draws the curtain. '…just about everywhere seeing as you asked.' As someone once said, 'Birth is a terminal condition called life.' Its written into the way the world is, into the whole cycle of life, the movement of the seasons, the evolution of species. '…just about everywhere seeing as you asked.'

In Ezekiel's prophetic imagination, in a valley, '…full of bones…there were very many lying in the valley and they were very dry' – death to the point of archaeology. Reading Ezekiel is a singular experience. His prophetic actions seem like echoes of contemporary performance art. He draws a picture of Jerusalem on a brick, arranges toy siege machines around it, and lies on his left side for 390 days and then his right for 40 days to symbolise the Lord's punishment of the houses of Israel and Judah respectively. On another occasion he shaves his head and beard, divides it into three. One third is burnt, one third he pursues with a sword around the city and the final third is scattered to the wind, all symbolising what the Lord will do to Jerusalem (Ez 4-5). If his actions are arresting, his imagery is a bit like a mash up between Tolkien and Mervyn Peake – the valley of dry bones is the least of it. But that is to digress.

If we are to appreciate the meaning of the valley of dry bones, we need to know that like his older contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel's ministry spanned both the appalling disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem and forced deportation of its leading citizens by Babylon in in 587 BC, and the early years of exile in Babylon. They were the only two who ministered across that divide. The book of Ezekiel has been edited into two parts. The first part contains a massive indictment of the sins and failings of Jerusalem which led to her destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's troops. The second, especially chapters 33-38, written in exile, is about hope and new possibility.

There is a relationship between them, and it is the holiness of God. Ezekiel's searing analysis of Jerusalem's sins and shortcomings in the first half is described as an affront to God's holiness. God takes Ezekiel into the Temple and says to him, 'Mortal, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me from my sanctuary? (Ez 8:6). So great is the affront, that in astonishing imagery of sapphire and fire and heavenly beings and celestial transport, '…the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house…'(Ez 10:18). God is sovereign and free, will not be dishonoured. God goes, terminating the contract or covenant that he made with his holy city, with the world and all in it. God cannot be contained. God walks free. Not even the greatest Temple or finest theology can trap him. God has gone. All that remains is absence. And in exile in Babylon, weeping by the rivers, remembering Jerusalem, so grief stricken they couldn't sing or play their lyres, the people of God had ample opportunity to reflect on that absence.

Ezekiel's contribution was to realise that holiness is about who God is in Godself, and after the judgement of Babylonian captivity, God's holiness gave birth to new opportunity. God promises Israel that he will gather them from the nations '…for the sake of my holy name…' (Ez 36:22), give them a new heart and spirit, cleanse them from their iniquities, and 'I will cause the towns to be inhabited and the waste places shall be rebuilt.' (Ez 36:33). And so we find Ezekiel doing his Alice Roberts bit in a field full of bones, and as he prophesies as God instructs, the wind, the spirit, life itself erupts in transforming wonder. The bones become skeletons, become people, and just so shall the dead bones of Israel come to life and Eden be re-born.

'Where, O death is your sting? Why, it's just about everywhere seeing as you asked.' Indeed so, but so too the holiness of God, for God is God, and where God is God, hope cannot be absent.

Bethany, but it could be Histon or Trumpington or Castle, a family in anguish, a loved one is very ill, and getting worse. It is the very ordinariness of it which is so moving. We've all been there, and it's here more than anywhere else in John's gospel, maybe all the gospels, where we see Jesus at his most human. This is a family that he loves, and by whom he is loved. Friendship and humanity are etched all over this story. Mary and Martha are at their wits end and they send a message to Jesus. And for two days he prevaricates, probably because he knows that to go to Bethany which was but a couple of miles from Jerusalem would be to invite the stoning or arrest which he'd only just avoided. So, he must have been weighing up his mission, his divine calling, against the needs of his dear friends. But in the end, he goes, the danger underlined by brave, resolute, if unimaginative, Thomas – 'Let us also go that we may die with him.' (Jn 11:16)

He's too late. By the time he arrives Lazarus is three days dead. The professional mourners are about their liturgical business. Martha and Mary are heartbroken, full of the 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' which the grieving know so well - 'If only you'd been here'. Not so much a rebuke as an expression of pain. And so to the tomb. Mary weeping along with the mourners and Jesus breaks into tears.

'Where, O death is your sting? Why, it's just about everywhere seeing as you asked.'

This story is about the awful reality of death, and as Jesus encounters it , the NRSV translates '[he]…was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved'. The rare verb John uses in other places describes deep emotion tinged with anger. As Jesus faces the reality of death, of human finitude, and the cruel equations of love and grief, he is furious. A prayer. 'Take away the stone', Jesus commands. But there will be stink, Martha protests. And he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus come out', and as he stumbles out, a further command, 'Unbind him and let him go'.

It is a marvellous rendering of the last of the signs in John's gospel which began back in Epiphany with the wedding at Cana. It is the purpose of the incarnation worked out in the midst of the ordinariness of families, love, illness and death – Jesus the life-giver. And it brings his own death and the cross into sharp focus. Lazarus lives, but it is therefore expedient says Caiphas immediately after that one man should die rather than a nation be destroyed.

But this is Lent, not Passiontide, and our attention is not on the events of Holy Week, but with the reality of death, and nowhere in Scripture is its reality clearer than in this story of the family at Bethany. In the Orthodox tradition, the Saturday before Palm Sunday is 'The Saturday of the Holy and Righteous Lazarus', and it allows believers to confront all their fears.

In 1 Peter 3:18 we are told that Jesus was made alive in the spirit, '…in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison'. That and a few other texts led to a tradition of the harrowing of hell. It greatly excited the medieval artistic imagination. Jesus triumphantly frees the souls of the righteous who died before his incarnation.

The harrowing of hell had almost faded from the theological scene by the reformation, yet the fears around death which it captured had not gone away. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, helps us understand its pastoral import – '[Christ] had, therefore, to conquer that fear which by nature continually torments and oppresses all mortals. This he could do only by fighting it. Now it will soon be more apparent that his was no common sorrow or one engendered by a light cause. Therefore, by his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, he was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up.' (*Institutes* II.xvi.11)

Calvin's pastoral sensitivity to the fears we all have surrounding death is echoed beautifully in the Orthodox liturgy for their Lazarus Saturday – 'The depths are afraid at Thy presence, O Lord, the source of life; all the waters are Thy servants. The gatekeepers tremble before Thee, O Christ, and the bars of hell are broken by Thy power, as Lazarus rises from the dead at Thy command, almighty Saviour who lovest mankind.'

Lazarus lives, but Lazarus lives to die again. There is great cost hidden in this story. Lazarus has to experience death twice. C.S. Lewis once wrote a poem called 'Stephen to Lazarus' in which Stephen, the first martyr. says that he gave up '…no more than life…' whereas Lazarus had to 'put out a second time to sea / well knowing that your death (in vain/died once) must all be died again'.

Dorothy Sayers, in her play *The man born to be king*, imagined Lazarus and Jesus at a dinner party, and Lazarus was asked to explain what he'd experienced in death – '*This* life is like weaving at the back of the loom. All you see is the crossing of threads. In *that* life you go round to the front and see the wonder of the pattern.' That pattern is both beautiful and terrible, and Lazarus continues, 'And how can I tell you? – it is *familiar*. You have known it from all eternity. For He that made it is the form of all things, himself both the weaver and the loom.'

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Indeed so, but like Calvin we know '…that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up.'

And to him be the praise and the glory. Amen.