Sermon for 5th in Lent Year A

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

i

Ezekiel’s picture of the dry bones coming to life was originally not about the hope of resurrection of the human body after death, but about the hope of the resurrection of the state of Judah after the Exile. Over time the story became something else.

As dreams of political resurrection after the Exile began to turn sour, as disappointment followed disappointment, as one foreign overlord was exchanged for another, so the picture of Ezekiel’s dry bones became to be what it is for Christians today – a vision of the hope of resurrection beyond death.

The Pharisees were among those Jewish groups that started to interpret this passage in this new way. They believed that when a person dies, the body decays, but the soul or spirit of righteous people goes to paradise where it joins those who have gone before into the presence of God. In paradise the soul still waits for the final consummation, the Day of Judgement.

At death a personal judgment has taken place so that the righteous are separated from the unrighteous, as in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Lazarus being the man at the rich man’s gate whose sores were licked by the dogs and Dives being the rich man who ignored his poverty (Luke 16:19-31). Both get a foretaste of what is in store.

Upon the Day of Judgment, after history has come to a close, the final verdict is given. At this point the resurrection of the body takes place in which, in Paul’s language, “that which is mortal puts on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53) and a new spiritual body is given. The Hebrews could not conceive of disembodied spirits floating around in the ether, but saw body, mind and spirit as a unity, together constituting a human being. The righteous would at that point be taken into heaven itself, whilst the unrighteous would be condemned to eternal punishment.

ii

The raising of Lazarus from the grave is a sign which points towards everyone’s hope of resurrection, but Jesus now takes a central part in the process. This is the new thing that God is doing in Jesus.

The story opens with the cryptic statement that upon receiving the message of Lazarus’ imminent death, Jesus deliberately delays his return by two days, declaring that Lazarus would not die. Yet in verse 14 Jesus has to explain to his disciples that Lazars has in fact died. Thereby showing he intended Lazarus to die in order to use his rising from the dead as a way of teaching the disciples about resurrection.

Jesus speaks of death metaphorically as being “asleep” – he does the same with Jairus’ daughter. But death is death and we and the disciples know that – but death becomes no more threatening than falling asleep in Jesus’ presence – that is the message of this whole episode.

When Martha says she knows that Lazarus will rise again on the “last day”, she is expressing the common belief as held by the Pharisees and others that on the Day of Judgement Lazarus can expect to be raised – either to reward or punishment, according to his just deserts.

Then we get to the main point of the story. Yes, Martha, that’s the usual belief, BUT, asks Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

That is the crucial challenge. Does Martha, do the disciples, do we believe that Jesus has the power of eternal life?

The fact that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days is significant, because the Jews believed the soul hovered over the corpse for up to 3 days before entering paradise. So if Jesus could raise Lazarus on the 4th day, when death in all its finality had set in, and in that climate, the smell of decay also, then Jesus cannot do more to demonstrate that he has the power over life and death. If Jesus can raise Lazarus after 4 days, then he can do it after 4 years or even 4,000 years – that is the logic of the argument.

So Jesus gives thanks when the stone is rolled away, presumably because there is no smell of putrefaction and therefore his faith that Lazarus’ death would not be the end result has been justified.

iii

The raising of Lazarus is the final sign before Jesus enters Jerusalem and faces his own death and subsequent resurrection. The sign of Lazarus is intended to demonstrate to the disciples what his strange remarks about being put to death and being raised again on the third day are all about. If Jesus has the power to restore Lazarus on the fourth day, they should have no fear on Jesus’ behalf as he walks willingly into Jerusalem towards his expected death.

The disciples are not the only witnesses to this sign and not the only ones to realise its potential for eliciting faith from those who doubt. For the Sanhedrin and those who opposed Jesus, the raising of Lazarus became the final straw:

Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him… (John 11:47-48).

Lazarus may have been a sign, but his resurrection differed from the resurrection of Jesus in several crucial ways. Whilst Lazarus’ resurrection was a demonstration only, Jesus’ resurrection was the real deal.

John tells us this in his reference to the grave clothes for example; Lazarus emerges from the tomb still encumbered with them, whereas John describes the grave clothes of Jesus as just lying where they were, the cloth around the head (the Sudarium, now believed to be in Orviedo cathedral) neatly folded. It is as if Jesus’ body was able to pass through the burial clothes in a manner that Lazarus could not. This is further repeated by recounting how Jesus appeared behind locked doors in his resurrection appearances, and references to his eating and drinking with his disciples are there to scotch any interpretation that Jesus was a ghost.

These details are to tell the reader that Lazarus was restored from death to additional earthly life and would therefore die once more in the natural way of things, whereas Jesus had come through to the ultimate point of eternal life, the resurrection of the body, and the life of heaven to which he ascends – according to John – on the same day as his resurrection (John 20:17).

Jesus does not conform to the Jewish picture of life after death. Instead of waiting for the final Day of Judgement, Jesus is raised on the third day. This is because of Jesus’ unique status as the Son of God. He has conquered death. If Lazarus or any other man or woman rises on the Day of Judgement it shall be because of what Jesus has accomplished on Calvary. His miraculous healings and his raising of the dead, such as the widow of Nain’s son (a pointer towards the future experience of his own mother, a widow, losing her son and receiving him back from death), his raising of Jairus’ daughter and of Lazarus are all demonstrations that he has the power of eternal life.

It is with such confidence that Jesus goes on towards Jerusalem. It is also with such confidence the disciples later face death and hardship for the sake of their faith. It is also with such confidence that we are called to face death, sickness, calamity and fear.

It is with such confidence struggling, dying churches, waning faith, cooling love and fading commitment can know that even in the face of apparently inevitable death, new life can spring forth. That is the very essence of Christian hope.

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