

22nd March 2026. 5th Sunday in Lent

Prayer for today: Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Among those who are sick we pray for Ian Dodds, Rosemary Belshaw, Will Sadler, Leo Pyle, John Gibson, Brenda Clark, Elizabeth Wood, Nigel Baty-Symes, Andrew McKendrick, Graeme Common, Kate Marris, Maureen Stevens, Prue and Nancy, Ned Ryan, Daniel Bosman, Suzie Dent, Nick Cook, Christina Baldwin, Lorraine Dodd, Kathleen Lee, Carol McKendrick, Stuart Bell, Maggie Bennett, Elizabeth Sambell, and Heather Loughead.

Among those whose year's mind is about this time we remember Thomas Johnson Lee, Doris Lee, Alan Proctor, Suzanne Tordoff and Jennie Hawkins.

Readings:

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'

I said, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'

⁴ Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"

Psalm 130

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;

² Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

John 11:1-45

11 Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is ill.’

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, ‘This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through

it.’ ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go back to Judea.’

⁸ ‘But Rabbi,’ they said, ‘a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?’

⁹ Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the day-time will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.’

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.’

¹² His disciples replied, ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

Jesus comforts the sisters of Lazarus

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that

Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ ‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’

²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’

²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

²⁷ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked.

‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’

³⁷ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ ‘Take away the stone,’ he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.’

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.

Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Thoughts on today’s readings

The RVI in Newcastle is one of England’s great hospitals and this means that patients with the most difficult and distressing illnesses and conditions are brought there, and this applies in particular to babies and children. Looking back on the 3 years I worked there as a chaplain, it seems to me that I went with little training or knowledge, though I was not lacking in confidence – not always a good combination. I spent a lot of time with very sick children and their families, and often had to accompany families to the mortuary to provide an escort and support. At times it could be heartbreaking, yet what was my distress compared to that of the poor folks whose world was falling apart in that rather horrible chapel of rest?

Reading the story of Lazarus reminded me of one of these awful deaths. A little girl was a patient on the children’s intensive care unit. She had a condition which resulted in every protective layer of her body, inside and out, failing. There was nothing the hospital could do to cure her, and she died. I was instructed to accompany her grieving parents and family to the chapel of rest. Her family were Christians, members of a Pentecostal Church, so I expected they might want to pray. What I was not expecting was that they wanted to pray for her to be restored to life. I did not know how to

respond. What, I asked, if she were not restored to life? Then, came the answer, they would accept that this was the will of God. After a while, they left the chapel, and the body of the little girl; quiet in their grief. I was left with questions. Were they wrong? Was I weak?

The story of Lazarus comes to us from a world which is very different to our own, yet disease, suffering, grief and death are as much part of human existence now as they were then.

I could not have known it then, but perhaps this experience and others like it were a part of my education and experience in preparation for what I might have to face one day as a parent. When our son was diagnosed with cancer we were told that it was perfectly treatable and that all might before long be well again. However after a few weeks it was clear that not only the disease but also his body’s response to the treatment was resulting in terrible damage. I remember one day on which I heard someone tell me he had about a 5% chance of recovery.

We did everything we could: we were there with him; I anointed him, and before his second operation it was his teacher Alan Currie who anointed him, and we prayed. What is clear is that we were never alone. Not only those who filled this Church one evening, but many people across this part of the world and further afield were praying too. Three days after his second operation his body began to show signs of healing. Why was he, why were we, spared? It can be understood in a number of ways, but for me, it still defies explanation. All I know is that I was grateful.

There is a temptation with the story of Lazarus to ‘spiritualise’ it: to explain it as a sort of legend to support the statement that ‘Jesus is the resurrection and the life’, rather in the same way that we can take

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the very dry bones as being an image of the spiritual deadness of the demoralised people of Israel. But then why is the story of the raising of Lazarus so graphic? It does not seek to provide tidy explanations: rather it invites us to engage with the mystery which is the presence and activity of the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

When news of the illness of Lazarus reached Jesus he was beyond the Jordan, where he had withdrawn because there were those in Jerusalem who wanted to arrest him for blasphemy. Clearly the sisters hoped he would come; why did he wait 2 days before deciding to return to Judea? It seems heartless to add to their distress for the sake of making the sign of the resurrection of Lazarus more emphatic. Yet the account makes clear his love and compassion : he wept with them at the tomb. This is not portrayed as the action of someone who belittles the reality of death, of someone who is playing a game in order to demonstrate the power of God.

There are translations which describe Jesus groaning within himself before Lazarus is raised to life, and in the story of the woman with the issue of blood who touches him and is healed he tells his disciples he knows power has gone out from him (Luke 8: 43-48). Are we to understand that the act of raising Lazarus was in some way agonising for Jesus?

In his words to Martha Jesus makes it clear that resurrection is not simply about a future expectation: it is about the present reality of his presence. For the Israel of Ezekiel it was the living Spirit of God which was their only hope of being restored from their deadness. They had their rules and their festivals, and we too can be tempted to explain, to rationalise, the things we find it hard to get our heads

round. But that way, it seems to me this morning's readings tell us, lies the valley of the dry bones.

Rather we are invited to engage with the living God, sovereign and beyond theories and explanation, yet source of all life, other and yet close, as Jesus was as he stood at the grave of Lazarus.