Passion Sunday in the time of Covid -19

Ezekiel 37 and John 11

Life out of death

‘Many people want to serve God’ read the sign outside the church ‘but only in an advisory capacity’. We might well want to advise God at the moment that the new coronavirus is not a good idea. Much of your creation, Lord, we might say, is amazing, beautiful, awe-inspiring. But you have made a mistake with this new coronavirus. It is not a good thing. Not at all. Please take it away!

But the Bible never tells us why bad things happen, or where evil first came from. It just tells us what God has done to fix things, to redeem the world - and the Bible shows us that we are far from bystanders in this process. It shows us how to live as God’s people, contributing to his plan. The Bible makes it very clear that God is at work transforming the world, the whole creation groaning with birth pangs as God makes it and us anew. It is not finished yet, and neither are we. So instead of objecting to what is going on, maybe it would be more constructive to ask, with the help of today’s readings, how we should respond to the coronavirus as the body of Christ.

We have heard two extraordinary readings, both speaking of miraculous new life: God’s breath breathing life into dry bones, Jesus’ words bringing resurrection to Lazarus. Ezekiel is speaking from the middle of a terrible crisis: Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, the temple razed to the ground, and the leading citizens deported. The whole basis of the covenant relationship between God and his people seems to be gone: the house of David, God’s chosen rulers, has been broken, and the dwelling place of God has been obliterated. What hope is left? In this context God sends the vision of the Spirit breathing life into dry bones. There is no situation so dire that God cannot restore to new life – he can bring hope into the most desperate places. He will not abandon his people, instead he will build them up so that they might know that he has spoken, and he will act.

Ezekiel’s vision might seem grand and inspiring but a long way from our own experience – but the story of the resurrection of Lazarus is full of very human voices. The disciples question Jesus, they are disturbed by his apparent indifference to Lazarus’ illness. When at last they all arrive back in Bethany, they are met by a distressed Martha, who accuses Jesus, just like we might have done: ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!’ We might well have had times in our lives when we would have liked Jesus to show up, God to have answered our prayers. Martha speaks for us all here – but she goes beyond most of our faith when she says ‘Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him’. Jesus draws out of her a declaration of faith in him: ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world’. It is in her trust that he goes on to call Lazarus back from the dead.

So how does that speak to our situation today? I know some of you have done better, but I have found the last two weeks extraordinarily stressful. It feels like we are living on the shores of a slowly approaching but inexorable tsunami of illness. I thought that being shut out from everyday life would be peaceful, a putting down of busyness and enjoying quiet times of reflection. In my garden and on our walks, I see spring slowly unfurling in beautiful countryside. But despite the lovely weather and the birdsong, I have found that far from being a peaceful time, the coronavirus shut down has been exhausting and endlessly worrying. I would like to ask God ‘How is anything good supposed to come out of this? Where is the Spirit breathing life into bones that Ezekiel saw? Where is Jesus’ voice heard, calling the dead to life?’

It's exactly this point, when we realise our need, when we reach out together, that God speaks to us. Just as Jesus said to Mary, he says to us: ‘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?’ imagine Jesus here now, asking each one of us, ‘Do you believe this?’ What do you answer? ‘I do, I really do’, or ‘I’d like to’, or even a cautious ‘possibly?’ Lord please help our unbelief, so that we can put our trust in you!

Because however the coronavirus came about, this is an opportunity for us to turn away from all our fake certainties. Jobs, financial security, family, the illusion of being in control in our lives, all are being whipped away from us, and we have to trust God. This crisis reveals only too painfully how much we put our trust elsewhere, and it challenges us to return to God.

But God does not give us a half-hearted assurance that all will be well, someday. He speaks to us now of his Spirit breathing life into our tired bones, pulling us up onto our feet, readying us to serve him. Jesus assures us of his life in us today. Even though we die, we find life in him. He lives in us, for always. We are his people. He speaks to us of his purposes: to bring that life to others, to renew and to redeem.

In quiet ordinary ways we can get on with being God’s people today – loving those we have been shut away with even through the tensions of this situation, helping others where we can, speaking hope and encouragement on the telephone, in emails and on social media, just doing our ordinary jobs with the knowledge that we do them for God. Have you ever thought that doing the washing up, or making the bed might be done to the glory of God? Just as the sunshine transforms the scene outside our windows, so God’s love transforms our day to day living. Call us out, Lord, from the darkness of fear into the glorious light of your presence. Amen