



5th Sunday in Lent Year A: Beyond the Dying: The LIVING

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14, Ps 130, Romans 8:8-11, John 11:1-45

Today we encounter the third of the great consecutive and lengthy accounts offered us by St John of three significant and miraculous encounters with Jesus. We have witnessed the prophetic reconciliation with the Samaritan Woman at the Well, then the healing of the Man born Blind and now, the piece de resistance, the prophetic and miraculous 'Raising of Lazarus'

We know that this is both a pointer towards the divine power of Christ to overcome and undo the power of death. But we know also that, in this case, resuscitation, revival are physical and temporary. Lazarus, one day, will die again. Whereas in Christ's own Resurrection – and therein lies the hope of Man, this defeat of death by the Divine Life is permanent, immutable and eternal.

It is hard for a man to countenance his own 'not being' but it is equally hard for him to imagine something as spectacular as his apotheosis, his transformation into the divine and forever life.

Lazarus is a stage on that journey.

Calvary and the Third Day are the destination.

Coupled with today's Gospel is an Old Testament passage that is almost obscurantist in its brevity but points to a much larger historical reality. It is the summation of God's prophesy by the, even by prophetic standards, most eccentric of the great writing prophets, Ezekiel. It is no less than a prophesy of resurrection for the people of Israel.

A moment to give you the backdrop to this astonishing claim.

EZEKIEL is the great prophet of the 6th century BC Babylonian Exile. There had been an earlier exile when the brutal hordes of Assyria had destroyed the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel and taken the ten tribes into captivity – from which they never returned. The Babylonian disaster came at the end of some failed fancy footwork between the rump state of Judah, the, as it turned out, unreliable Egyptian allies and a failure to gauge the might and intent of the burgeoning empire of Babylon. The little tribe of Judah was besieged, beaten, punished. Jerusalem was destroyed. The governing class and all those of any note were taken into exile in Babylon. No nation or people had, could or would survive that, either before or since.

Some of the sorrow and bitterness that accompanied that apparently terminal defeat can be heard in Psalm 137. You may recall the disturbingly cheerful Boney M version – By the Waters of Babylon.

And, much later, of the great joy of release in Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of^[a] Zion,

we were like those who dreamed.^[b]

Our mouths were filled with laughter,

our tongues with songs of joy.

In the exile, the Jewish community came together in adversity and returned to the Lord. In the absence of the Temple they began to develop the structure of the Synagogue system which would carry them through all the vicissitudes, sufferings, persecutions and future exiles that history held in store for them.

It is to this community that Ezekiel preaches and prophesies.

Through him the Lord paints a picture of a valley of dry bones, the dessicated and skeletal remains of a nation, once alive to God, now strewn lifeless and apparently beyond hope in the barren desert of agnosticism, atheism, syncretism and cultural meltdown.

The Lord asks the Prophet: 'Can these bones live?'

Ezekiel wisely and modestly replies: 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'

Then the Lord said to Ezekiel:

"Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 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.'"

So Ezekiel speaks God's Word to the valley of the dead. And piece by piece the disconnected and the dead bones begin to reconnect and cohere.

When the whole body has reassembled, The Lord breathes His Spirit into it and gives it life. It is no less than a re-enactment of the Creation of Man. It is no less than a promise of Resurrection to the Faithful.

With God, nothing is impossible.

What of us then? What of the Church of God in this cultural exile, in this land of dry bones and dead institutions ?

What if we spoke the WORD ,which is Christ, over the barren spiritual wilderness of our nation? Dare we hope for the reassembly of the Body?

What if we invoked the Holy Spirit over this lifeless corpse, to rekindle the flame of love for God on the altar of our dusty hearts?

Or are we without hope, exiles dying in a foreign land, an island of strangers?

There are yet straws in the wind that bring us hope of not just survival but revival – the chance to live again as the living Church of God in our land.

The recent Bible Society Report entitled, 'The Quiet Revival' gives us these figures from its recent survey. Those of you who were at Bodmin last week will know that I am repeating myself here but I make no apology because it is important that we all know this. Entitled 'The Quiet Revival' it reports evidence from a huge survey it commissioned in 2025. Against a constant background of reports over the last twenty years outlining the decline of the Church in our land, it came up with rather different findings.

I must preface this with a warning that they are no cause for complacency or self-congratulation but they are, at last, a sign of hope.

Attendance at Church over the last five years is up 13%.

While the C of E retains the largest chunk, its market share has reduced from 41% to 34% while the Catholic share has risen from 23% to 31%. Some 12% of the population now report as churchgoers compared with 8% a few years ago.

While over 65s remain the major element in attendance and 45-64 year olds show decline, the 18 -44 yr olds show growth and in the 18-24 range a dramatic hike from only 4% to 16%.

In the 18-34 range Catholics have 41% of the business, Pentecostals 18%.

There is also little doubt that these figures are, in part at least, the result of the changing demographic of our communities and the impact of immigration.

The survey also discovers that Church attenders are considerably more likely to be happy, fulfilled, purposeful, engaged in good works, generous to charity and so on.

What is going on here is the gradual and dawning recognition that a society which is predicated on materialism, a rejection of God, a blindness to the beauty and glory of the Faith holds decreasing attraction for a new generation challenged by the uncertainties and moral confusions of the world into which they were born.

We deserve no credit for this apparent, sudden and welcome turning of the tide but we must be alert to it and prepared to be as helpful, open, welcoming and encouraging to it as we can.

The young are tired of being blindsided by the culture and offered the depressing and bitter fruits of Social Darwinism and Marxist Materialism. They are looking for The Light.

The least we can do is help them on their way.

There are a lot of blind people out there, through no fault of their own, stumbling around in the civilisational dark of humanist hopelessness.

What we know now is that they are no longer deaf and, brought to Jesus, may yet bear witness to the Glory of God and worship Him.

Our part is to be the Church fully, lovingly, unashamedly – welcoming the weary, embracing the stranger, guiding the wanderer, encouraging the seeker, both penitent for our sins and thankful for the chance to live again.

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