

Fifth Sunday in Lent – St Paul’s Manuka – 2 April, 2017.**Ezekiel 37: 1-14****Psalm 130****Romans 8: 6-11****John 11: 1-45**

The idea that ‘life’ can come back to a person, like we see in the Gospel reading, or that flesh can be placed on dry bones, like we hear about in the Exekiel reading, is something that we might doubt. How can someone live who has already died? How can flesh return to bones that have been bleached in the desert? We might scoff at the suggestion of new life and new flesh and yet we sometimes come across stories like we have read this morning – all about new life.

Mary and Martha stood with Jesus before the tomb in which their brother Lazarus was lying. He had died four days earlier. Jesus in his humanity was visibly moved and he cried because of the death of his friend. Lazarus’ death confronted him with not only with death itself but his own impending death. It was a time of real sadness and grief for him and them all.

Then Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and he came, still wrapped in the grave clothes.

The coming from life to death and life again is a very real part of the story of the world and its people. There are many stories where people come from death to life. They come from the death of grief and sickness to new life. They come from the death of war and violence to freedom and new life. We all have our moments of new life, even in the midst of sickness and death.

Lazarus lived and died and then he was entombed in a cave. Lazarus was called out of his tomb by the power of Jesus and he came to new life. Those who watched were amazed.

Life and death and new life are very much part of the journey of Christian faith. We are born and reborn in baptism. We live in the faith of Christ and we have the promise of new life beyond death. The gospel story today is as much a preparation for us for the events of Easter as it was for Jesus. Death confronts us too. As Jesus stood before the tomb, confronted by the death of his friend, he was confronted by his own

impending death. He knew that in a short time he would be on the cross and that he would die.

As we head towards Easter we head not only towards Jesus' death and our own, but we head towards the promise of new life. The great Christian hope and promise is that there is new life, beyond death, won for us and all people through the glorious death and resurrection of Jesus. Our role in all this is to respond with belief.

The Lazarus story points us towards the fact that Jesus gives us life at the cost of his own. It is possible therefore to see something deeper than the literal events which we find in the Lazarus story. Like all the Gospel passages we have been reading in the last few weeks there is more going on here than literal events. We heard the story of Nicodemus, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well and the story of the blind man who regained his sight. They all began with literal interpretation – misinterpreting what Jesus was saying and ended with belief in the Christ. It was their growth in faith and their belief in the Christ that brought them to a new place – to new life. In coming to raise Lazarus we see Jesus bringing him to new life but we also see the promise for ourselves and all we love – bringing us from death to new life. Jesus comes to raise us also as we come to believe in him. Jesus comes from the safety of his own country and faces death in Jerusalem but he also comes with the new hope and new life through belief in him. The story of Lazarus is a parable for the whole Gospel. Jesus comes to raise Lazarus from the dead, just as he comes to you and me and those we love who have gone before us. Jesus is calling us from death to life.

We are all Lazarus in a sense. We are the friends of Jesus. We are the ones Jesus loved. For us Jesus wept. Jesus stands before our tomb and wrestles with the cost of his life-giving love. Jesus calls you and me forth to new life and strips from us the bands of death – the things that trouble us. Jesus comes to our world and gives his life so that we might have new life.

Over the next little while we travel the road of Easter and we have the chance to reflect on the passion and know its power. Our church creates for us the scene. Next Sunday we walk with those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We wave our palms and call out 'Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of the Lord'. We travel with our Lord through Holy Week. We have our feet washed on Maundy Thursday and we remember that Jesus left us this great sacrament of the Eucharist to sustain us and feed us with his very self. We wait with our

Lord at the watch before the Blessed Sacrament on Thursday evening as Jesus is alone abandoned by his followers. We feel the power of his presence. We stand before the cross on Good Friday and we proclaim his death. We come to experience the new life of Easter, first in the lighting of the new fire on Easter Eve and then in the joy of Easter morning as we sing alleluia and know that Jesus is risen from the dead.

There is a real sense that we can write ourselves into the script here. We travel the road of Holy Week with our Lord – our Easter liturgies help us to travel that road. Can I encourage you to be part of the great days of Easter and to know the power of the liturgy – in word, scripture, sacrament, action and the very power of Jesus' death and rising again lived out for us here in this place. Our Lenten discipline is of little use if it does not point us and propel us into the events of Easter.

We are all like Lazarus bound by the cords that hold us and trouble us. It is Jesus who calls us to new life through the Easter mysteries celebrated right here in this place. It is Jesus who unwraps the bands that hold us and calls us to new life. My wish is that we may experience the power of the Easter mysteries beginning next Sunday with Palm Sunday, moving into Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Eve and travelling through to Easter morning.

God stands alongside us and understands. God hears our deepest longings and cries. God knows we want freedom. All God asks is that we that come in faith. Jesus calls us to worship him in new life. May we have the grace and will to respond to Christ's call and to be present with him to worship him in spirit and truth.