

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

The Fifth Sunday in Lent (A)

Ezekiel 37.1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8.6-11

John 11.1-45

Ezekiel 37.1-14

1. This vision is taken from the section in Ezekiel (chs. 33-39) which contains oracles of hope for those in exile.
 - a. Ezekiel was part of the group which had been deported to Babylon (sixth century, B.C.)
 - i. The “valley” he refers to is the valley of the Tigris-Euphrates, *i.e.*, in Babylon.
2. When the prophet is called to prophesy to the bones of the slain (the bones represent the people of Israel), he does so and “the breath” comes into the bones, which are then revived.
 - a. The Hebrew word for “breath,” *ru’ach*, is the same word for Spirit.
 - i. This prophesy of the resurrection also promises the coming of the Spirit upon Israel.
 - ii. This passage never speaks of the resurrection of individuals, but the concept is not far removed. (Cf. Isa. 26.19 and Dan. 12.2).
3. While this prophesy does have an apocalyptic tenor, the circumstance (of exile) of the writing of Ezekiel should not be ignored.
 - a. The spiritual dryness of the people is seen in this valley of “dry bones” (hope has died), but the LORD will send His Spirit upon His people.
 - b. “Dry bones” are “deader than dead,” a theme which will reappear in the Gospel lesson for today.

Psalm 130

1. A prayer for deliverance from personal trouble.
 - a. The “depths” from which the psalmist calls are the waters of chaos, a theme common in the Old Testament (as in Jonah).
 - i. The word itself, however, is rare, appearing only in four other Old Testament texts: Isaiah 51:10; Ezekiel 27:34 and Psalm 69:2, 14.
2. The prayer is both a direct appeal and a commentary on why the psalmist can appeal to God.
 - a. Because the LORD is merciful.
 - b. The psalmist awaits the LORD’s “word,” His prophetic hope.
 - i. All of Israel must look to this hope.

Romans 8.6-11

1. Paul has just reached a climax in his argument about the Law. In Romans 7 he sought to demonstrate that perverted human nature is such that it subverts the Law.

- a. Confronting human nature with the demands of the law does not bring about change.
 - i. The law does not then bring life but death.
 - ii. Paul refers to the “law” here using the word *nomos*. This is *not* the Law of Moses, but the human moral impulse by which we say we can govern our own behavior.
 1. People are led into more guilt and more captivity to patterns of behavior which are destructive. "Who shall liberate me from this body/personality of death?" (7.25).
2. The situation seems quite hopeless, but for divine intervention. That divine intervention is found in Jesus Christ.
3. In 8.5 Paul then explains the contrast. People live according to "the flesh" or according to the Spirit.
 - a. These are two mindsets.
 - i. “Flesh” means trying to improve yourself by your own efforts and remaining focused on yourself. (Attempting to effect our own salvation is known as the heresy of “Pelagianism”.)
 1. "Flesh" is not neutral here nor does it mean our human nature in itself, let alone our sexual nature as if to be human is bad.
 2. "Flesh" is a certain way of living, a perversion of our true selves.
 - ii. “Spirit” means opening yourself to the transforming reality of love through the Spirit.
4. Now, in the lesson for today, Paul focuses on how we can find peace.
 - a. He opens by saying that “to set the mind on the flesh is death” (v. 6), using the term for “death” which parallels the concept in Ezekiel: “dead:dead,” utterly dried out and without spirit.
 - i. We are then our own worst enemies and resist being loved. This includes resisting God (v. 7).
 - ii. Even when we acknowledge God's law as good we won't be able to keep it because we lack the inner resources (v. 7).
 - iii. We can't please God like that and we also do no good to those around us and to ourselves (v. 8).
 1. *But*, love liberates us and gives us hope. God's Spirit enters people (v. 9), and in this we have new life.

John 11.1-45

1. The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and final “sign” of Jesus’ identity, authority, and mission in John.
 - a. The signs (Greek = *semeia*) are found in parallel with the “I AM” sayings, by which Jesus identifies Himself using the Holy name of God (as revealed at Exodus 3.14).
2. At the start of this lesson, Jesus and his disciples are beyond the Jordan, out of reach of the authorities. He receives word of Lazarus in Bethany, and his disciples think Lazarus is

just sleeping (hence the delay), but Jesus knows the purpose behind how and when He will see Lazarus.

- a. Later, the disciples think that perhaps Jesus is seeking death, and Thomas shows courageous loyalty.
 - b. The timing of what happens matters here. The point is made that Lazarus has been in the grave four days. He is thus “dead:dead”.
 - i. Jewish tradition held that the soul hovered over the body for three days after physical death.
 1. This tradition is followed in some churches (and by some ministers), who will baptize a person already dead, provided the person has died just before.
3. Lazarus is described as “loved” by Jesus. The word is not used in connection with another person, and this has led to the tradition in some churches that Lazarus is the “beloved disciple” (not John, author of the Gospel).
4. Like the man born blind in John 9 (Lent 4), Martha addresses Jesus as “Lord” and acknowledges that He is the Messiah.
 - a. This she says after saying that whatever Jesus asks of God will be granted.
 - i. This statement anticipates what Jesus tells His disciples about prayer at 15.16 and at 16.23.
5. In v. 25, when Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life,” the Greek definite article *hé* is used (as at 14.6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”)
 - a. The use of the definite article in Greek (which lacks indefinite articles) indicates exclusivity, *e.g.*:
 - i. “I am *the one and only* way and *the one and only* resurrection and *the one and only* life.”
 1. The point of the saying, and ultimately of the narrative as a whole, is to make and celebrate the claim that people who believe in Jesus find life.
 - a. It is eternal life, which includes timelessness or eternity in the temporal sense, but the focus is quality not quantity. It is sharing the life of God here and now and forever.
 2. In John’s narrative, miracles are signs that point to a new and higher reality!