

Whitsun / Pentecost 2021 – 23rd May

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14 p868 Acts 2 vv 1-21 p1093
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Romans 8 vv 22-27 (not read) John 15v 26 – 16 v15 p1083

GOD, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Acts 2²¹)

Given the circumstances, I'm preparing these sermons eight days in advance. The lunchtime news I have just listened to included two items which seemed to me to contradict one another. One was a warning from doctors and scientists that we should be very cautious about relaxing the precautions we are taking against COVID. They are concerned about the spread of new variants of the disease which are apparently more infectious than the versions we've got used to and which could turn out to be more serious than earlier variants and even have some resistance themselves to the vaccines we have developed. The picture may be clearer by the time I deliver this sermon and I may have to make changes from this script which will appear online and in the weekly newsletters. At present, the advice is that the vaccinations many of us have already had will protect us against the Indian variant and that it is probably not very different from earlier versions of the virus in terms of the severity of the symptoms which it produces. If so, we only have to get the unvaccinated vaccinated and then we can continue to follow the current road map out of lockdown. It is all, however, very frustrating just when we thought we had got on top of the virus and that we would soon be going back to doing many of the things which we enjoy but have not been able to do fully for so long. Ezekiel's vision begins with a valley of dry bones. We may think of coming upon a battlefield weeks after the confrontation. Our side has been defeated. The bodies have not even been buried and what is left of our hopes is a valley of dry bones. You don't think it's quite that bad? Neither do I, but some people do, and for all of us the emergence of new possibly more virulent variants is a major setback.

This brings me to the other news item which seemed to contradict the gloom and doom of the scientists. Representatives of the travel industry were castigating the government for being too cautious. They were insisting that, so long as we take reasonable care, it is reasonable to open up the skies to leisure travel and other inessential international traffic. If we don't, millions of people will miss out on holidays, seeing family, business trips and all the other occasions for travel to which we have become accustomed. If we don't open up, there will be serious consequences for jobs in the travel industry and the taxpayer will probably again be called in to shore things up. After the news, we were invited to call *Any Answers* with our thoughts on whether the government has got the balance right. Well, I don't know," I thought, "And I don't suppose anybody else does either." There are, of course people who know a great deal more about these things than I do, but nobody can say with complete certainty how many instances of disease will follow on from our taking particular courses of action, how serious any cases might be, how many will result in long COVID and how many will end in the death of the patient.

Things, then, look grim and, if you're like me, you might be feeling a degree of uncertainty. I don't like uncertainty. In the reading from Romans 8, which we didn't have, S Paul says, *We are saved by hope. Why do we have hope? Because Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.* (Psalm 124⁸). We couldn't ask a surer ground for hope than that. *Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.* In the vision which God shows him, Ezekiel sees those dead, dry, scattered bones come together again. Their sinews and flesh and skin return. They are no longer randomly distributed bones, nor even merely articulated skeletons; they are human bodies. Ezekiel then prophesies to the wind and breath returns to these bodies. They live. They rise up a mighty army. *Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.*

God can do anything and *our help standeth in the Name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.* God pours out His Holy Spirit. The Spirit, as we say in the Creed, is the Lord and Giver of Life. In our Acts reading, the Spirit falls upon the apostles and they preach the Gospel to people of many tongues to each in their own language. S Peter warns of all kinds of terrible things that will happen. *And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come:* Terrifying events are prophesied and are to be expected, but, wait for it, Peter concludes this first part of his address: *And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

Bad things will happen. Bad things do happen. But we have the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. He bears witness to Jesus. In the Spirit, we bear witness to Jesus. The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. As Christians, our lives are witnesses to the Truth. Jesus is the Way, the Truth & the Life. Deserted and desolate the battlefield may be, but so long as God is looking down on us in His love and pouring out His Holy Spirit upon us, we are never alone. He brings order out of chaos, fullness out of emptiness and life out of death. *Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.* So S Paul can say (Romans 8): ²² *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.* ²³ *And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.* ²⁴ *For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?* ²⁵ *But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.* ²⁶ *Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.* ²⁷ *And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.*

