

## Passion Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14 p868, Romans 8 vv 5-11 p1134, John 11 vv 1-45 p1077

A Roman Catholic bishop, who is a friend of mine, asked a very good question (though not in these words). What is the Church doing about the corona virus which other people are not doing? What are we doing for people's salvation? It is right that we are praying. That is what Christian people are called to do – to pray in faith and hope and love<sup>1</sup>. We are also passing on the advice and instructions issued by the medics and the government. It is important that we act on these. We are playing our part, as are so many individuals and institutions, to care for people adversely affected by the virus and the precautions being taken to limit its spread. This too is right and our Christian duty. But, apart from prayer, what else are we offering that statutory and voluntary bodies cannot? What are we doing about the salvation of people's souls? Personally, I feel very frustrated (and I am sure that many others do too) that we are not allowed at this time to meet together for worship, prayer and reading the Word of God and that we cannot therefore celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. I am uncomfortably aware that Jesus said *Do this in remembrance of me* and that we are not doing it. Roman Catholic priests are allowed to celebrate mass on their own on behalf of the whole Church. We Anglican ministers are not allowed to do that currently (because we feel that *communion* implies that more than one person is performing the rite), but this may have to change if we are unable to meet together for worship for too many months. Books (including bibles and prayer books), the phone, the internet have all helped us to realise that we remain in fellowship together even though we are physically distant and that we can worship together even if our bodies are not in the same rooms. When I say my daily prayers, I do think about all those other people throughout the world praying daily in fellowship with God and with one another. I know some of our congregation are making a point of reading the readings, saying the prayers and even singing the hymns we should be singing together in church on their own or just with their families at home.

But do we have a word for the world, a word from God? Jesus is the Word of God. What is God saying to the world today through Him? What is the Spirit saying to the churches and how, in the power of that same Spirit, are the churches to mediate God's Word to the world?

There is a word of judgment in all this and a call to repentance. In what ways do our lives fall short of what God requires of us? *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?* (Micah 6<sup>8</sup>). In what ways do we fall short? In what ways does the world fall short of God's Will for us – that we should love Him with our whole hearts and our neighbours as

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<sup>1</sup> We had just completed the Lord's Prayer in our sermon series on the catechism last week when we were told that our church buildings must now be locked up. This is what follows about prayer in the catechism. The language is old-fashioned, but once you've thought about it (and realised that *ghostly* means the same as *spiritual*), it is a good summary of what prayer is about – that God will look after us and other people in this world and the world to come and that we may have grace to live according to His Will – which is, after all, the only way we can live a fulfilled life.

*Question.* What desirest thou of God in this Prayer?

*Answer.* I desire my Lord God our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all goodness, to send his grace unto me, and to all people: that we may worship him, serve him, and obey him, as we ought to do. And I pray unto God, that he will send us all things that be needful both for our souls and bodies; and that he will be merciful unto us, and forgive us our sins; and that it will please him to save and defend us in all dangers ghostly and bodily; and that he will keep us from all sin and wickedness, and from our ghostly enemy, and from everlasting death. And this I trust he will do of his mercy and goodness, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore I say, Amen, So be it.

ourselves, that we should receive everything that we receive from Him (which is everything there is) with thankful hearts, share generously with those in need, as He gives so generously to us, and to treat His Creation with the respect and care we owe to its Creator?

Judgment and mercy. This is Passion Sunday when we think of how God's justice and mercy meet on the Cross of Jesus Who is the incarnation of God Who is love. The Cross is God's Word to the Church, God's Word to the world, justice and mercy. The Cross is the message which God has entrusted to the Church, the Good News Christians are commissioned to proclaim to the whole of Creation.

The readings for Passion Sunday are hope, light in the darkness. Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is very well known for a biblical passage even in these secular days – not least because of the slightly comic Gospel song based on it. You've got to get inside it to understand just how profound it is, a real message of hope. In Ezekiel's days, the Israelites were twice defeated by the Babylonians. The Temple and much of the city of Jerusalem were destroyed. Much of their wealth had been plundered. The leading citizens were forced to live in exile in Babylon. Those left in Judaea lived amidst the ruins in poverty and despair or exiled themselves in other lands, many going back to Egypt, the very place from which God had delivered them centuries before. In the wars, as so often, there had been desperate hunger and disease as well as the bloodshed inflicted in battle. There wasn't much hope. The people of God were like a valley of dry bones – dead, long dead, without hope of restoration. Yet God gives Ezekiel a message of hope. God can and God will restore Israel. There will be a resurrection. Things will come together. The people of God will be revived by the Spirit of God restoring their life. Subsequent generations would see that this is not only about the restoration of the state of Israel after the Babylonian captivity, but that it is God's promise of eternal life to all who believe in Him, people of all nations. Jesus dies on the Cross and the Holy Spirit is poured out from the Throne of Grace to inspire us with the gift of eternal life.

In the Romans reading, S Paul talks about us as Christians living in the Spirit now. We have the gift of eternal life the moment we first believe. We are citizens of heaven here and now, here on earth. Our calling is to live as the spirit-filled people of God now and in all eternity. What we know of God now, the Holy Spirit working in us, is both a foretaste and an assurance of what is to come in the hereafter. The wonderful story in the Gospel of the raising of Lazarus proclaims the glorious truth that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. ***I AM the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.***

Our message, then, is hope. Yes, we do pray for God to look after us during the epidemic, that He will be with the sick and the anxious and fearful, that He will protect those trying to care for others, that He will uphold and guide those in authority with difficult decisions to take and heavy burdens to bear, and that He grant success to those who are trying to prevent the spread of the disease and to find treatments and cures. We do pray all this, however, in the light of *the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ*. Not only can we have faith in God in this present crisis, we can trust Him to look after us for ever, in the life to come (which is far better) as well as our life here on earth.