**Life out of death Lent 5 Ezekiel 37.1-14 John 11.1-45**

**Introduction**

There is a poem that is often said at funerals by Henry Scott Holland. It has a lovely sentiment that your loved one is just around the corner, speaking of how the spiritual world is not far from us. But it starts, ‘Death is nothing at all.’ Really?? That is not necessarily the Christian understanding of death. Death is seen in the Scriptures as the last enemy for God to conquer.

**Old Testament**

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 There is no way to downplay the desolation in our first reading. In 597 BCE, the first of the Jewish exiles were taken to Babylon, then 10 years later, Jerusalem was reduced to a pile of rubble when Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Babylonian Empire) ran out of patience and, to enforce their submission, slaughtered all in his way. The valley of dry bones represents the complete devastation, humiliation and hopelessness of a thoroughly defeated people. In prophesying to these bones, Ezekiel is prophesying to the scattered and few remaining people of Israel, far from home and fearful. The question is, will their nation live again? Exile and return is a theme that stretches across our sacred story in the Bible. In the valley of dry bones, we find the ultimate expression of exile – God’s people are far from home, with no life left and no expectation that the present reality could change. But Ezekiel declares a life-giving word of hope that will bring these exiles back home. The powerful image of wind in the desert, of life in the deadest of places, is amazing.

**Application**

• Where are the dry bones today? What about the refugee camps surrounding Syria • Where are people fearful and forgotten? • Where are lives barren and empty? What about East Africans starving to death? • What words do we have that can bring life? • Are words enough and, if not, what else must we do to bring life to desolate places?

**New Testament**

John 11: 1-45 The story of the raising of Lazarus also asks, can there be life again in places of death? In all the death and destruction that sometimes surrounds us, terrorists wreaking havoc in London, can hope live and breathe and life be restored through Jesus Christ?

It is an intriguing story that brings Jesus face to face with a very personal grief. In the shortest verse in the Bible we read that Jesus wept. In the musical, the Messiah, we hear quoting from Isaiah 53, that he was acquainted with grief, possibly in response to the death of his father when he was young and here in the loss of his good friend, Lazarus. Sometimes I wonder why did he cry, when he knew that he would restore him to life again? It was in empathy with Mary and Martha, but also his own sorrow at disease and death and destruction in the world.

**Application**

God is not detached, remote unfeeling about the trials and suffering of this life. In Jesus God enters into our pain, our turmoil, our neediness and our fragile mortality – the love is personal. He understands and sympathises with our grief. And because he loves fully and calls us to do the same, new life is possible in the deadest places.

Yet more than that he vanquished death by offering up his life that we might have new life in him. In a mysterious way, his death represented all of humankind with its injustice, destruction, disease and death so that death no longer has the final word. Eternal life is found in him. This is not pie in the sky when we die, but begins now as we live in relationship with God who is the source of life and love.

This is the penultimate week in Lent a time of spring and new life all around us, with bulbs flowering, trees in blossom, birds singing in the mornings. And today we give thanks for new life in the birth of children and their baptism into the body of Christ. It is also the time we reflect on all the Jesus has done for us. We have metaphorically followed the story of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted in the desert, and then gathered large numbers of followers, teaching them about God and healing the sick and feeding the hungry with bread and offering refreshing water of new life. Today we are given a foretaste of Easter where Jesus rose from death to new life to bring salvation, liberation and life in all its fullness for the world.

If we are to bring life, justice, healing and hope to others, then we need to begin with ourselves and we will find that our changed lives will bring new life to others. AMEN.