

Grace Lutheran Community, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020, Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A

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And He [the LORD] said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”  
So I answered, “O LORD God, You know.”  
Ezekiel 37:3

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit our Comforter and Guide.

We are living in one of the more significant times in our Nation’s history, and certainly in the life of the Church. You do not need me to expand on the situation that is occurring around the world at the moment in relation to the Coronavirus COVID-19. Just over three months ago many people didn’t even know there was a word ‘coronavirus’. But how things have changed!

Currently many people are practicing ‘social distancing’ (again, a new, bit now also very common, phrase). Social distancing does not mean social isolation, although we want to be practicing appropriate ‘social distancing’ and listening very carefully to the message from our Government and National Cabinet and various health authorities. But social distancing does not mean social isolation, and it’s still possible to go outside for a walk.

Recently I went for a walk with my wife along Redcliffe Parade and Redcliffe Esplanade. As I walked here I had a great sense of sadness and loss. I looked at the various eating places now closed (or in very limited mode with takeaway) I thought about all those business owners under great stress (and some who would probably be facing very significant financial hardship). And I thought about many staff (such as the wait staff) who suddenly found themselves unemployed. And I thought about the effect people on not only a financial level, but also at an emotional and social and familial and spiritual level. This would be profound. Many people are in their homes, afraid to go outside (even to their back verandah – which actually would be a good thing to do if you can, to experience the fresh air and enjoy the gift of God’s creation).

What are you doing? How are you coping? Do you have a sense of anxiety and fear? Do you have a sense of grief and loss? Do you know of others who may be feeling this way? In what way are you coping? And in what way are you seeking to still remain ‘socially connected’ even if you are experiencing ‘social distancing’?

As a Pastor in a church, I have had a sense of grief and loss. Last weekend we still conducted worship in our Church Building (this was prior to the Prime Minister’s conference on the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> March which brought profound change). We were observing those government requirements of ‘social distancing’ and use of space (4m<sup>2</sup>). But after our evening service, I had a sense of sadness – expecting extra restrictions on people’s ability to be close to one another. At the conclusion of evening worship I fully expected that this would be our last time in the church building for some time. And so it came to pass. Never before in church history have churches been ‘closed’ like this. And now I won’t be seeing the faces of so many wonderful caring people who gather together. And I know many will miss that connection of being with a friend, and to receive that greeting of connection.

How has all this 'change' affected you? Are you able to talk about this? Have you shared how you are feeling with members of your family, or good friends? (Perhaps by calling them on the phone – please do...)

At this time many people are dealing with a swirl of emotions. Who would have thought that some people would fight over toilet paper in the supermarket? What about all the other crisis and challenges in the world (such as the Locust Plague in the Middle East and Africa and Asia, and various conflicts around the world)?

When people go through difficult times, our emotions can swirl. There are many, many resources in helping us deal with these emotions (and some of the best are caring family and friends – if we are willing to open up and share our feelings in a safe and caring environment).

One of the significant people in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who reflected on feeling of 'grief and loss' was Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (in her book, "On Death and Dying"). Kübler-Ross spoke of five stages (or aspects) of grief (denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance). Kübler-Ross's work was originally in relation to terminally ill patients prior to death, or people who have lost a loved one. These thoughts are easily transferable in other areas (think of how Queensland feels after a loss in a 'State-Of-Origin' game). And we also know that this thought by Kübler-Ross is neither a 'linear process' (we don't go from one to another), or comprehensive. But nevertheless, Kübler-Ross presented some clarity in terms of how people may feel in incredible difficult times.

We hear something of this in our Gospel today ([John 11:1-45](#)) in the death of Lazarus. Both Mary and Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, our brother would not have died."

"Lord, if You had been here..." How many times have we said something like this... "If you had..." These are strong words by Martha and Mary. We don't know the exact emotions they were feeling at this time (we don't have the tone of their voices. Did they have an 'angry voice' or a 'sad voice', or even 'faith-filled voices'?). But it would be reasonable to assume a sense of sadness and grief and loss, with commensurate thoughts and feelings.

There is something 'reasonable' in the words of Martha and Mary. They said this because when Jesus got the news that Lazarus was ill, Jesus was only some three kilometres away. Yet Jesus (only a short distance away) did not come until four days after Lazarus had been laid in the tomb! One can gain an understanding as to why Mary and Martha would say these words to Jesus ("If..."). Jesus was only three kilometres away but yet did not immediately come when called.

We know how this situation unfolds. Jesus speaks to Martha and Mary. And Jesus indeed revives Lazarus from death. This is a profound miracle. This is one of those really, really profound moments in human history. Lazarus is revived from the dead. We know that that is not our common experience. Whilst I could tell you of a couple of funerals where people halted the funeral stating that the person who has died would rise from death (they didn't!), it is not our experience to see people after they have died and been buried. Hence our grief... And hence the 'processes' our body and mind employ to deal with grief and loss in difficult times.

How do you handle grief and loss? How have you dealt with it? Have you thought how you would cope if someone dear to you was suddenly called from this life?

It is not a thought we would normally dwell upon (and, indeed, it would be morbid to do so: our God is a God of the living, and not the dead). But the time will come when we all have to deal with the reality that someone close to us will die – and sometimes in the most difficult and tragic of circumstances...

In this season of Lent, and as we approach the great events of Easter, we are remembering how God has defeated death and the power of death, through the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. But the question God asked Ezekiel so long ago still stands for us: “Son of man (or “Mortal man’ or ‘O mortal’), can these bones live?” This expression “Son of man” – which actually is ‘son of adam’ – goes back to [Genesis 5:1-3](#). Adam is being described as being “made in the likeness of God.” But after the Fall, when death had come into the world, we are now made in the ‘image’ of ‘Adam’ – that is, as people who know that sin and death has come into this world. (This is why some translation have ‘mortal’ at this point).

“Son of man (or “Mortal man’ or ‘O mortal’), can these bones live?” When the Lord God spoke these words to Ezekiel, it was around 600 BC. This was the time the Babylonians raided and destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, and carried many people off into Babylon.

Ezekiel had the task of ‘speaking out’ just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. From around 593 BC to 571 BC Ezekiel had a calling to be like a ‘watchman’ on the walls of an ancient city (cf. [Ezekiel 33](#) and our Psalm for today: [Psalm 130:5-6](#)). Ezekiel had to cry out that an ‘enemy’ was approaching. But the ‘enemy’ was not simply the Babylonians with their armies: the ‘enemy’ was the ‘sin’ of the people. Ezekiel spoke of the impending destruction of the Temple. And after the Temple was destroyed, Ezekiel also cried out about the future restoration of the Temple. And like for all the prophets, this was a ‘hard task’. Ezekiel had to ‘speak the truth’ to people.

As a result of all this, Ezekiel was carried off into captivity (unlike the prophet Jeremiah who remained in Jerusalem for a long time). However, Ezekiel did not enter the royal courts (like Daniel). Ezekiel was a priest who previously served in the Temple that was destroyed. And as a priest who served in that Temple, he was given a vision that the Temple would be destroyed ([Ezekiel 24](#)). During this period of destruction (as the Temple is destroyed) Ezekiel’s wife dies. And throughout this (and prior to this) Ezekiel had been tasked by God to speak out against the evil in his nation, and to announce judgement was coming. One does not need a vivid imagination, and only requires a little bit of effort, to get an idea of how Ezekiel may have felt. He lost his nation, his place of worship, and his wife...

Are there people around you that may be feeling this way? How can we respond?

But in the midst of this destruction and sadness, God spoke to Ezekiel, and through Ezekiel, of a time of restoration (indeed 16 of 48 chapters of Ezekiel – one third of his book, are words of restoration: and what is incredible about this is that Ezekiel did not live to see it). And the vision of Ezekiel we have before us today (of the valley of dry bones) represents the darkest of Ezekiel’s experience, as well as the greatest hope.

Ezekiel was given a ‘vision’ of such a valley, but many people would have seen many bones after the reality of war (and sadly, in our world today, such places still exist). And within his vision Ezekiel spoke of the hopelessness that many people felt ([Ezekiel 37:11](#)): The people said, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are completely cut off”.

But the LORD also gives Ezekiel a vision of these bones being reassembled and reanimated. God gives a vision of the 'Spirit' entering those who were once.

At its original level, these words given through Ezekiel were words of hope and comfort to a people in exile. There is some debate among Bible scholars of the words given through Ezekiel also speak of a general resurrection of the dead. But in Daniel 12 we hear of God speak of such a resurrection (Daniel 12:2-3): The LORD said, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." (cf. [Isaiah 25:6-8](#)).

Jesus said to Martha (John 11:25-26): "I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? The vision God gave Ezekiel was that the 'Spirit' (Hebrew: *ruach*, 'breath') would enter the 'dead bones' and people would live.

There are times in our lives when we feel 'dead' on the 'inside'. We could come up with a very long list as to why this is so. When someone dies, we feel that death. When a relationship crumbles, we feel the death of that relationship. When events suddenly change in 'our world', we can have feelings of 'grief and loss'.

But God gave Ezekiel a vision of the 'Spirit' giving life to 'dead people'. And at Pentecost (and our baptism) the Holy Spirit enters us and brings us the 'new life' through faith in Jesus – in Jesus who has died, and been buried, and resurrected from the dead. What a wonderful gift this is!

No situation is completely ever 'beyond hope' when the Spirit of God is present in us.

Ezekiel was serving as a watchman, warning the Israelites of their sins against God and urging, pleading, begging them to repent. And the whole point of speaking to people about what we may see as their 'sin' is not to belittle, not to judge, not to castigate, not to turn away. His aim was to call people to 'turn back to God'. It's to bring people person back into a living relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

There is always 'hope' in any situation we encounter in this life – not because our 'hope' is founded on any human endeavour (even though human beings are capable of doing incredible things in medical science, technological advances, and the like. And we rejoice in these gifts). Nor is our hope founded in some 'power of positive thinking' (although it's also good to have a 'positive attitude'). But we can have a 'deeper hope' for our souls.

Our 'hope' is that even in the seemingly most 'hopeless situation' God can breathe His 'Breath of Life' into us. Yes – those God-given responses of 'denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance' may actually help you work through various situations you may have to deal with (not that we ever want to become stuck in these places). But we have an eternal hope. Our sure 'hope' is in Jesus.

God says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:6). Not even death itself can shake us when we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25) Still today, God creates hope out of hopelessness and life out of death. As the Lord tells Ezekiel, and each of you, "I have spoken and I will do it." Amen

Now the peace which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

### Here are some extra resources for Ezekiel

*Note, there are many resources available on Internet, but not all of are of the same value. There are some extraordinary points of view. There may be some caution required when searching through this platform. But there is also much to be gained with a careful searching through this platform.*

Some other resources:

Overview: Ezekiel 1-33 from "BibleProject"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-CIPu1nko8>

Overview: Ezekiel 34-48

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDeCWW\\_Bnyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDeCWW_Bnyw)

God's blessings in your study and reflection of His Word.