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Sermon preached on Lent 5 2020 by The Revd Lucy Winkett

The readings

Ezekiel 37.1-14: The Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'

John 11.1-45: The Death of Lazarus

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

SERMON TEXT

Stay where you are

The strangeness of this situation is striking for those people who normally get on a bus or a tube in London and travel to St James's Church right by Piccadilly Circus, but are unable to today. For others, if you're joining us from different places and you don't normally gather in the church building on a Sunday, this may not seem strange at all; it's a YouTube video, the same as millions of others.

This moment is a glimpse for people who don't normally see it of what happens inside church buildings all the time. Or a version of it anyway.

And one of the key things that happens in church services is the telling of stories – ancient and new – sometimes mysterious stories, with vivid characters or strange happenings but quite often really ordinary stories about human beings making their way through life, the story of people in the light of the story of God – which is our Scripture.

And today's stories are both humdingers. The story of the raising of Lazarus is very famous. The action is quite simple, if dramatic.

Jesus hears of the sickness of a good friend called Lazarus. Instead of going to see him, he stays where he is for 2 days during which time Lazarus dies. Lazarus's two sisters – Martha and Mary – react in different ways but both are grieving. Martha doesn't wait for Jesus to arrive in the village for the funeral – she goes out to meet him and challenges him; if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Fabulous Martha – straight talking, emotionally intelligent, brave woman.

At the tomb, Jesus acts very dramatically. He is incredibly distressed, and he demands that the stone be taken away from the entrance to the tomb. Again Martha speaks up – no she says – you can't possibly open up a grave – the body will be stinking – it's been in there for 4 days.

Jesus insists, and shouts Lazarus's name – and to the astonishment of the crowd, Lazarus emerges, still wrapped in the grave clothes.

It's a dramatic story, full of vivid characters, highly emotional. And the meaning of the story, the deep layers of meaning, take a lifetime to unpeel.

Like some of you perhaps I've heard this story many times. And as I've pondered on it over the years and asked my rather obvious questions; could that really have happened? Why is John's gospel the only one to tell this story? Finding too, in Martha, a role model not just for women but for men of faith in her energy and honesty. And as I've heard this story over the years, one detail has always eluded me really. It's near the beginning. Jesus obviously loves Lazarus and the family – but when he hears he's gravely ill, he stays where he is for another two days.

The classical theological interpretation of this is that Jesus has a plan, that he doesn't come too soon, because the point of the story is to show the glory – (*doxa* in Greek)– of God – something that is a theme of John's – and so the human cost of that is the grief that Mary and Martha feel, and the fact that Lazarus has to die.

Theologically that makes a logic and a sense; it reinforces an interpretation of this particular gospel that Jesus is perhaps more other-worldly – transcendent - than in the other gospels – and these themes of *timeliness*, of the *revelation of God's glory*, and the singular vocation of Jesus make sense.

But it's so important not simply to nod and accept these kinds of academic theological interpretations – because they have a habit of necessarily neatening and theorising about what we know to be in real life a more chaotic and fluid situation.

What's more, the quite extraordinary way that Jesus's behaviour is described doesn't sound that aloof: at the graveside, our translation says that Jesus is 'greatly disturbed'. But actually, the Greek word used for this is really quite extreme. It's the same word used to describe a horse pawing the ground, snorting. Jesus is crying. The picture painted of him is of a man beside himself with emotion and at the point of raising Lazarus, the word used for Jesus calling to Lazarus is the same word used to describe the crowd baying for Barabbas a few days later. It isn't a polite 'calling'. It's shouting. Jesus screams.

It's a story that is dusty, messy, full of grief and shocking change.

Remember Ezekiel's valley of dry bones from the first lesson? It's a story that is dusty, messy, full of grief and shocking change.

As I read these readings, I felt my heart racing – but to be honest, perhaps like yours, it's been racing for a while. This gospel spoke straight into the sudden change in our circumstances, the realisation of what is at stake, the prospect of illness for ourselves or people we love. The unusual nearness of thoughts about death.

This story of Lazarus is so vivid, so arresting, that there's an infinite amount to say about it.

But today, it's that detail of Jesus staying where he is 2 more days that has new meaning. I've not ever understood or really accepted it, as I mentioned, despite the logical theological explanations offered for it.

But now I can see something in this that I have never seen before.

That sometimes – and now is one of those times - it's important to stay away from the people you love to show your love for them.

Much of what is happening now is counter intuitive. I spoke last week about the way that many people are speaking about this as a war – and that it might be helpful in some ways but not in others.

That in a war, our instinct is to get together, to comfort each other, to strengthen our resolve.

What we're being asked to do now is not that. It is to stay away from each other physically. As in this gospel, even when we know someone is ill, to stay where we are and find other ways to connect and communicate.

This isn't true for everyone of course – the evening applause for NHS workers and carers this week brought many to tears in the street.

But for most of us, in forcing us to act in ways we find extremely difficult, this social distancing is uncompromisingly requiring us to act in each other's best interests not our own. And because it is such an uncompromising requirement, it seems to me that's why it's taken a while for it to sink in what is required of us.

At every level of behaviour, every day, this situation challenges us to ask ourselves; by my choice today, whose needs are being met? Mine – because I want to be the one who defied the rules to continue to help others. Or – the needs of another person – whose wellbeing and life expectancy depends on my decision to stay where I am for a while longer.

We're in the fifth week of a 6 week season – Lent – the 40 days before Easter is sometimes called the 'sad springtime of the church'; this achingly beautiful season full of longing, in tune with the creation we are part of; surrounded with intimations of new life everywhere, but not quite yet, not quite there.

A season of energy confined, of new life, for now curled up in a bud, buttoned up in a seed, wrapped up in a blossom that heralds the fruit not yet here.

Stay where you are. Wherever that is. Even while your Lazarus is sick and even if your Lazarus dies, stay where you are. For there, mysteriously, without warning or explanation, God is with you.

And even for those who are still moving, still going out, still walking towards situations the rest of us are asked to stay away from, this odd and mysterious detail in the story can hold cavernous meaning. Because in a crisis such as this, we are divided into two kinds of people; those who become extremely busy, with government and other programmes to devise and administer, with ventilators to design and manufacture, with care homes, hospitals, hospices and mortuaries to run to capacity; with children to home-school, with drugs to administer, with deliveries to organise.

Others however, become strangely still, with nothing, absolutely nothing to do except worry about the sudden loss of income, circumstances and prospects.

And still others whose life before was one of confinement that is now more perilous than before. For some the stay at home message is a horrifying one. It's perilous to stay at home if home is not

safe because it's a place of violence and abuse. Anyone in that situation is urged to seek help. Today.

And practising social distancing is confusing if your mind has been fractured by life, if you have dementia or serious mental health problems and are living in an institution. 'Stay at home' sounds like a bad joke for the men and women whose home is the streets – I spoke with several yesterday in central London who are feeling hopeless and distressed now that all the public spaces they usually find some respite – public libraries, some coffee shops, church buildings, are shut to them. 'It's never been like this' said one man who had slept fitfully on a night bus.

Buried deep within the Christian tradition is a profound spiritual teaching that asks the same of us as is being asked in these days.

That spiritual teaching is also; Stay where you are.

This is not so much a physical staying – although it can be linked with that – but a spiritual staying where you are.

This has always been a challenge but is perhaps in today's society especially so. Staying where you are is a counter intuitive message in a world and a society where progress is best when it is fast, where 'moving forward' and 'going forward' have become clichés not just of business leaders but for all of us.

Staying where you are, as Jesus stayed where he was, for the good of another, for the good of the whole, is something that has been taught for the whole of Christian history.

While our society is, to use the colloquial phrase on lockdown, and movement is restricted, our society looks as if it has become still. But far from it. The restriction of our physical movement can cause something of an emotional and spiritual explosion; we are permanently – inside anyway – in a state of flight or fight. Because the situation is so challenging, we will do anything – anything – to distract ourselves from it. We become less mobile physically, but our minds, if not tended to, become places of vacuous over activity, morbid thoughts, fears and perilous anxiety.

Christian spirituality challenges us to stay where we are but for this not to be stagnation. It is a stillness that enables us to sink down. Deep into the heart of who we are, expecting to find God, the spark of the divine, in the depths.

It takes huge courage to 'stay'. What we normally want to do is flee the deepest parts of ourselves. We deliberately create a hectic, distracted society outside ourselves – either physically or online - in order precisely to stop us facing the reality that we are a messy mixture of valour and selfishness, of hubris and stunning generosity, of violence towards ourselves or others, and at the same time capable of the most imaginative acts of peace-making.

Stay where you are.

This means face yourself. You and I are asked to inhabit our own lives as they are, knowing that you are held and loved, forgiven and free-er than you can possibly imagine, even while your movement is confined.

As you are.

Not as you wish you were, or as that person over there.

Stay where you are for the good of the whole.

This means spiritually as well as physically.

Because if we want to develop a spiritual practice that will better serve the world, it will be rooted in what might have to be quite a bracing acceptance of the unfinished creature that you are, the human being God has made and is re-making. A real practical acceptance, not a flight into a fantasy version of yourself that you thought you should be by now.

I will be more able to love my neighbour as myself when I stop trying to flee into the empty distractions I surround myself with: they will be different for all of us but can include over-busyness, competitiveness, anxious comparisons, self-administered anaesthetics of all kinds; Distractions that look like they will make me happy but in the end find me, like Ezekiel, sitting in the valley of the dry bones of my life, begging them to remember how to dance.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is what you might call God's body language; and so in this gospel, so near to the end of his own life, Jesus stayed where he was for the good of the whole world.

It cost him dearly; he wept and yelled and in the end by God's grace, new life emerged from the grave blinking into the light.

Please God, for us too, let it be so.

Amen.