**Lent 5A:**

**A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37**

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, ‘Prophesy 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, ‘Prophesy 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.’

**A reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 8**

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John:**

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.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

One of the things that I have noticed over the past week or so that I least expected is a sense of connectedness – alongside a frantic scrabbling to get to grips with the technology necessary to maintain it.

Why am I feeling more connected when we are physically further apart? Because I see people making the effort to remain so: I see people praying together; I see people bearing each other’s burdens; I see people carrying each other through this.

Rather than being stuck in our own little mental bubbles, we are stuck in our own physical bubbles but straining to retain relationships with people we can no longer see. I have had emails from friends I normally only hear from at Christmas; and Chris had a phonecall from a distant cousin only yesterday; I have had emails from many of you out there, just checking in on how I’m doing and keeping me up to date with how you are all doing.

We have always used whatsapp and facetime with our boys – and they with each other - but the other evening we all sat in our own homes: in Devon and Cardiff and Manchester and Stockholm and South Weald, each with a bottle of wine open, and we talked and laughed together as a whole family for two and a half hours. It wasn’t quite round the dinner table with our elbows propped, but it was the best we could manage, and it was really really good.

On the one hand, our visible, physical world is continuing to shrink but on the other, our spiritual awareness and connections are growing accordingly greater.

These stories of course also serve to highlight the isolation of those people who have no access to the internet – and Chris’ mother is one of those - so if you know any of those and think they would appreciate a phone call, do please pick up the phone. Or let me have their number so that I can. They are the people I am most concerned about right now.

So to this morning’s very long gospel reading. The story of the raising of Lazarus happens in chapter 11, bang in the middle of John’s gospel. I have a volume of commentary which comes in two parts and eleven is the first chapter of the second volume. The middle is a really important point, a pivotal point, in lots of stories; so much meaning hinges on what unfolds here.

Lazarus dies and Jesus takes his time getting there. Lazarus’s sisters are not best-pleased. Where the heck have you been? Jesus would have been wise not to tell them that the delay had been deliberate – or at least to break it to them gently once the situation reached its happy ending. The plot already thickens: why would he not come straightaway when one of his closest friends is dying?

And then Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus – where he has been for four days, if you remember – and he is wracked with grief and emotion. All funerals are naturally times of high emotion – I conducted one particularly poignant one this past week at the crematorium – that being the only place, other than a graveside where funerals are permitted to happen at the moment – and a chapel which normally holds almost a hundred people contained chairs for ten, the maximum allowed, set out in domino five formation, either side of the central aisle.

It took my breath away just to see the pitiful sight of a family, with enormous dignity, sitting apart from one another, unable to touch one another, at that very time when they most need to give and receive physical comfort. **THIS** is why we are observing the rules of lock-down – so that as few people as possible need to go through this harrowing experience.

See, people said, how much Jesus loved Lazarus. Yes, Jesus was grieving and confronting human death, but this is also the moment when he knew that acting in the face of death – bringing Lazarus back from the dead – would set in motion the inexorable path towards his own death. The authorities would be provoked by this beyond anything that Jesus had done before and would be gunning for him from here.

There are echoes of Jesus’ grief here when, just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in chapter 12, he says: my soul is troubled … and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? … But here in this Lazarus story, he already declares: I am the resurrection and the life.

This is how the story will play out and he is willing to bring his friend to life even at the cost of his own death.

Maybe I have been stuck at home for too long already, but I am struck by the phrase: Come out. This summons to live is not just to Lazarus but to all of us. Jesus’ glorification will release that possibility for every one of us – the possibility not only of physical resurrection and also the call into eternal life.

Lazarus may be entombed in a literal sense but we have become entombed – by our fears and current anxieties certainly, and by this looming sense of darkness which is afflicting us all at the moment, but also by our thinking and behaving and our self-absorption in more general terms. But Jesus reassures us that the gift of eternal life is unchanged and unchanging, and we must engage in this coronavirus experience, as in everything, as people who inhabit eternal life.

Just a final word on the Ezekiel reading: God’s promise and act is always to bring life, no matter how impossible that might look at times. And even when our bones are dried up, and we are cut off completely – as we are, in a way, from each other at present – God’s promise is to put his spirit within us and we shall live. We shall be connected to each other once more because God joins all those random bits of the body together so that we are no longer random bits, dried up and abandoned; we **are** one body. Thanks be to God.

**Amen**