

Today we finally reach the fifth Sunday of Lent and the start of Passiontide! This year Lent seems to have lasted a long time, or maybe that's just me; and then depending on your mood – today we are greeted in worship with yet another long passage from John, and a relatively long story from Ezekiel both of which aim to focus our minds on the promise of resurrection amidst the challenges of everyday life. At one level it all feels a bit too much – and yet it is at the heart of all that we are – regardless of my impatience at the season this year.

Passiontide - the last two weeks of lent and is a time we more intently turn towards the cross and the hope of resurrection. All symbols and images in our church, and often in our homes, are veiled during this period as a reminder that Christ divinity is hidden from the world until the end of his passion. In this time we are invited to single-minded devotion to Christ.

This kind of single-mindedness is often rare today – we are so often expected to multi-task, to be able to hold many balls in the air at once. Often we are only single minded in today's society when we are attempting to convince others that our way is the right or only way and so it is often seen as a failing rather than as opportunity. I was challenged by this several times during the week when I was placed in situations when individuals or groups were trying to convince me that theirs was the only option – this was a on a range of situations from why they should park in the church car park, to why I was just wrong! But this is not the single- mindedness of passiontide – this time is more about mindfulness (not a new trend but rather an ancient Christian practice) – removing anything from our lives or routine which will not allow us to fully engage the moment, and in this case, in the most wondrous two weeks of our journey of faith. Passiontide – Holy Week and Easter invite us to make space to unpack our faith and journey forward.

Yesterday, while I supposed to be reflecting during our quiet morning, I became amused by one of our neighbours who were moving, who I could see out the chapel window – they had ordered two trucks to help. One was a removal van (I assume moving all that is necessary for their living) the other was a waste removal company (who seemed to be as full as the moving van) who I understand took what was not required. What a great way to do it – to take with us only what we need.

This is in essence is what that next two weeks will require from us in our faith journey – that we only take what is necessary as we engage as fully as possible in our story of faith – in the stories of despair and resurrection. Both our readings today prepare us for this – they begin in lament, sorry and pain – and then end in hopeful resurrection.

In our reading from Ezekiel, dry bones are knit back together and are infused with life-giving breath, while in John, Lazarus is brought back to life after four days in the tomb. In neither case is resurrection life necessarily pretty. Resurrection is not new life, the perfect promise of a new-born baby, rather its renewed life, life forged from death; even the risen Jesus still bore his scars. Renewed life is the vision of God's ever-present gift of life -- is as near to us as breathing!

Ezekiel's vision is not so much about death for Ezekiel's community, but their fear of exile, the fear of being cut off from God. Ezekiel reminds them that despite their fear, God is as near to them as their own breath. Ezekiel's vision does nothing to alleviate them of their present difficult circumstances, though it does promise them a future in their own land. Though they remain in exile, still mourning the loss of familiar ways to find and meet God, they are reassured of God's presence.

It is a very strange reading, and one which in our modern context is hard to fully appreciate. While we too often fear things – so often we expect to have that 'fixed'. Ezekiel's vision at one level is about how we live with what life brings us; but it is also about seeing the bigger picture. There is more to come, even if it can't be seen now.

And then we have Lazarus! The narrative begins with Jesus in retreat across the Jordan after the second attempt to stone him in Jerusalem at the end of John 10. John more than any other writer helps us to understand the political situation which is before them – the Romans and the synagogue leaders do not want anyone stirring up political unrest. When he tells his disciples that they are returning to Judea, they object on the basis of the danger to him; but Jesus knows there is more than what they can see at stake.

The next scene occurs near the village of Bethany as Jesus approaches. Martha comes out to greet Jesus and immediately laments his having delayed his coming because she knows that he could have saved her brother's life. Martha fetches Mary and Mary's lament echoes Martha's. Jesus, who will also weep, is said to be greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

Being in relationship with Jesus means facing death and grief with him and learning that still, in spite of the death and the dryness, life is not only a future hope. Abundant life is now.

One of the commentators I was reading suggested that one the things which so often do as modern Christian do is that we ask too little of each other in the community of faith. We don't really expect God to change things now. He makes the point that the promises of God we announce are not only about life eternal with God or even about God's forgiveness at the last day. Rather, the Gospel should make a tangible difference now, make things possible now, open up opportunities and options now,

transform relationships now. The promises of God are present tense, not just future. Do we take time, do we make space to see the bigger picture? Passiontide is a space when we can reflect on this very question.

The thing about all these resurrection stories is that God is inviting us to make a difference – to see what is important, as well as all that is possible. They are also inviting us to see the power of God at work already in this place; and knowing God knows better than we can what struggle and grief feel like, and yet God is participating in and continues to create in this fantastic world, but it means we have to step outside our fears, as well as look out for what else might be happening.

How then do we face our fears? We will have many strategies we have developed over the years. Some of us will throw our energy into other projects, some of us will try to manage others fear so we don't have to address our own and some of us will walk straight into our fears – and of course there will be other strategies. The promises of our readings today is that we are challenged to think about how we live, or don't live, as a result of the fears we have – and how we too move forward to embrace the hope of the resurrection. And what is that hope? It is living in the fullness of life, and in death. It is making the most of what we have, and being responsible for our own lives.

There is something too in these stories about seeing the whole picture. One of the reasons we hear all the John reading is that is too easy to focus in on one part, on the lament or the resurrection, or the disciple's fear – without seeing the fullness and promise of the whole story. This too is true of us as we approach passiontide, but also in the way we approach life or even our mission. We are not the first people to be here! We are not the first people see the pain of the world and want to fix it. We are not the only ones working for justice. We have to see the part that we play in the bigger picture as well as our small part of that picture. The disciples wanted to focus just on one bit – but Jesus challenged them to see the whole context, which in the end meant Lazarus would live!

There is so much in all these stories – but at their heart, as we come to these final days of Lent and approach holy week we are invited to work out what we need for the journey, and leave the rest behind. We are challenged to see our part in the bigger picture, and the work of others around us – but most importantly we are challenged leave fear behind and look mindfully, or even with single-mindedness on the face of God and see what it reflects back to us about our lives and loves.

Jesus loved. It was this that gives him strength in returning to Judea and in facing the days that follow. We too will need love, and compassion, and maybe even strength as we journey together in the coming days. However you focus this passiontide, may we feel God's breath renewing our life and community. Amen.