

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Life and death

Death is something that nearly all of us have encountered in our lives. Sometimes we have got to know someone and for many years they have battled to defeat death. Then the end has come. Then there is the kind of event that comes to us suddenly. So it was for me this Tuesday. An old girl-friend who I had got to know when I was training to be a teacher rang me up to tell me that Joan had died. She was 80 years old. As someone only 2 years younger, it is a reminder that my time is now limited. What is far worse is when someone much younger is taken from us.

This morning, we have heard three stories from the Bible and in each of them we have heard about life and death.

The first reading from the book of Ezekiel gives us a glimpse of the suffering of God's people over a long period of time. The valley of dry bones is a vision of how God is going to transform them by bringing back from Babylon to Israel and in doing so, they will be able to settle in their own land. This particular story reminds me of a song I first heard in a play in London. It was about enslaved African Americans who adapted this part of the Gospel and made it into a spiritual, symbolizing hope, resurrection and ultimate liberation from slavery.

What is astonishing here is that God's people, overcome by suffering and death, could lift up their eyes to the Lord who gives us strength.

Our Gospel reading is much easier for us to understand. It is clearly about just one person who dies. But notice – once again the journey of Jesus to Bethany is about danger. He was only 2 days walk from Jerusalem and as soon as he had brought back Lazarus from the dead, he and his disciples had get out of Judea.

The second reading we heard this morning is from the book of Romans. This was a long letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome. In this short discussion Paul makes very clear the difference between Christians and non-Christians. He declares that the mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. We preachers cannot say often enough – first to ourselves and then to our sisters and brothers in Christ – that even though our bodies are subject to death, because of sin, the Spirit gives us life because of righteousness. And if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us, he who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies because his spirit lives in us.

What we have just heard was a short part of the letter of Paul to the Romans.

I first studied the letter of St Paul in the book of Romans about 60 years ago. It gets a bit difficult when he tries to explain our relationship with God now and in the future. Fortunately, I bought a book about 58 years ago written by a theologian from Switzerland called Karl Barth. He wrote, The Spirit of him who raised up Jesus from the dead is the Spirit that dwells in you. Those who have contact with the Spirit have contact with God, with the hidden, holy unknown God, who lives in light unapproachable. God's life is beyond life and death. God's goodness is beyond good and evil. God's yes is beyond, yes and no, God's beyond is beyond Here and There. Truth, therefore, does not stand and fall with us, does not live and die with us, is not right when we are right and wrong when we are deceived, does not triumph in our victory and fail when we are defeated. Truth is death poised above the cradle; it is life

breathing o'er the grave. Therefore, Truth deposes the mighty from their seats and exalts them of low degree. Therefore, it can turn every human being's Yes into No and every human being's No into Yes. Therefore, Truth is where we climb up into heaven and also where we make our abode in hell. Because Truth is eternally pre-eminent over all that we have and are, it is our hope, or undying portion, and our indestructible relationship with God.

The One that raised up Jesus from the dead shall also quicken our mortal bodies because of his Spirit that dwells in us.

That is a bit more than complicated, but that is my life, perhaps yours as well.

The great thing is quite simple when we turn to God and seek him throughout our days. Then we can sing, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day, yes deep in my heart I do believe that we shall overcome some day."