

*Between the words that are spoken and the words that are heard, may the Spirit of God be present.*

What is your greatest fear right now? Is it the loss of someone you love who is vulnerable, the loss of your own job and any vestige of financial security, the loss of your own health, or the loss of the world as it used to be just a few short weeks ago? My greatest fear is coronavirus getting into my mother's senior home in England and her dying without me having any way to say goodbye.

It seems like anyone who isn't afraid at the moment isn't awake. And, to be clear, fear and distress are allowed, expected, even healthy in situations like these. God's people have always expressed the full range of their very human emotions to God. From the rage and despair of the psalms – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? - to Jesus weeping, maybe even ugly crying, at the grave side of his friend. We are a people who know what it is to walk through wilderness, to walk through despair, to walk through death and to be accompanied by God for every single step. We are a people who know what it is to walk through the bleakest shadow and to find new light on the other side.

I've always thought there is something deeply ironic in today's readings coming at this point in the church year. We're still deep in Lent, we haven't even reached Passiontide yet, let alone the new life of the resurrection. But God's promise of new life doesn't wait for us to get to the crucifixion or to the empty tomb, It doesn't wait for the end of a pandemic. It comes to surprise us with joy before we could ever expect it. It breaks into our quiet time of discipline, preparation and separation with a shout of new possibility, new hope, new life.

Our Hebrew scripture reading and our gospel tell us of two different ways that God gives new life, each of which we need to hear and cling to in the midst of this pandemic.

Lazarus first. He is called out of the cool quiet safety of the cave in which he sleeps in death into the fierce light of life, into the painful joy of his sisters, into noise and hubbub and renewed responsibilities and relationships and life. Let's be clear Lazarus was not taking physical isolating to extremes, he was dead. God's fierce gift of life in Christ reaches across that narrow barrier and calls this man to return. To return and then one day to die again.

I do not think we can expect ourselves or our beloved ones to be called back to this life from being dead three days. That sharp divine focus on one life seems now to be a broad divine panorama of all lives. God's voice doesn't now call one person back from death – but calls all of us back

from the many small deaths that keep us from living free, loving, joy-filled, purposeful lives. The death that is despair – I doubt I’m the only one who has woken in the night to cry into my pillow, the death that is indifference – surely those old folk don’t mind dying so that my prosperous life is secure, the death that is hate – let’s make this virus an excuse for yet another brand of racism. Hear Christ’s voice calling you to come out from those small deaths, follow that voice into the light of hope, of cherishing the other, of deep love for all fragile humanity.

And then there is the new life that comes to that valley of the dry bones. That wasteland of a society that had turned away from God’s call to justice and to love and had lost its claim to humanity in the process. A society that no longer has the softness of flesh, the vulnerability of blood, the potential of muscle; one that has been reduced to hardness, to scarcity, to the unyielding breakable insufficiency of bone.

Ezekiel may have been speaking of what he saw in his own time and people. A people defeated by their own inner demons as well as by outside forces of oppressive, aggressive empires. We need to speak of what we see in our own time and our own people.

We are a profoundly broken society, broken long before Covid-19 came along to highlight our deficiencies. We choose leaders for ourselves who consistently put the economic prosperity of large companies above the basic needs of the poor. We rate our own safety as more important than the well-being of others and use fear as a reason to hold children in cages. We fail to weep whenever we see a fellow human being sleeping in dirt on a street corner. This is us – me as well as ‘them’ as well as you. Our society. Our responsibility. Our loss of humanity to become bare cold bones.

But we are not a forsaken society. New breath, new gentleness, new vulnerability, new life can come to this bleak valley, to these stripped bones. Can these bones live? Yes they can, now as then! It is beyond time to open ourselves to God’s breath in us. To the breath that brought us life in the first place. To the breath that speaks words of love and forgiveness. To the breath that breathes in every human being, every living creature, and that unites us more closely more fiercely than our shared vulnerability to Covid 19.

How to do that? How to let the prophetic breath of God into our society’s dry bones? How to let the life-giving voice of Christ into our personal little deaths? It is only through the second that we can do the first. To let Christ call us from our small deaths of selfish choices, our small deaths of fearful living, our small deaths of hopelessness. To decide to live as if each person mattered as much as we do. To decide to live as though we

truly believe in a God who can bring forgiveness out of judgment,  
abundance out of scarcity, hope out of despair, life out of death.

And to live like this without denying the storm of emotions that sweep  
through us on a daily basis. The fear, the despair, the anger, the longing  
for life to be otherwise. Bring these to God. Speak these to others. Know  
your humanity, and in knowing your own, know the humanity of every  
person who shares this world with you.

I'll leave you with the words of Australian poet Michael Leunig

When the heart  
Is cut or cracked or broken  
Do not clutch it  
Let the wound lie open

Let the wind  
From the good old sea blow in  
To bathe the wound with salt  
And let it sting

Let a stray dog lick it  
Let a bird lean in the hole and sing  
A simple song like a tiny bell  
And let it ring