

SERMON: 29 March 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" Can dry bones live again? "

(Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1(38)-45)

John told me he's lost everything. He's been laid off from his job because of the lack of business due to the virus.

As yet, he's been unable to find other work or receive benefit. He can't support his family in the way he'd want to. He's managed to get some food bank support but is still struggling to feed his three kids.

He feels like someone who is as low as anyone can go.

He's way down in the pit of despair.

Out of the depths, O Lord, I cry to you.

The current Covid-19 crisis that the world is facing is not unlike the kind of crisis that the nation of Israel faced during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC.

In that time, all hope was gone.

As Ezekiel wrote, (the people) say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off' (Ezekiel 37:11).

Israel had lost her livelihood, her prosperity, her homeland, her Temple, her religion, even families had been separated and some had died.

And there was no prospect of change anytime soon.

The future looked bleak and not worth living.

It was into that world of hopelessness and despair that God spoke a message.

It was a message that people like John today still need to hear.

It was a message of hope in the face of despair.

It was a promise of new life.

I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, says the Sovereign Lord (37:14).

It was a word and it is a word.

A word for John in his despair, and all the other John's up and down the land and throughout this world.

You will have life breathed into you again.

That day will come, even after what just now feels like an eternity.

It's not. God inhabits the eternal.

God is Lord of the eternal and God will have the last word.

Not corona virus nor death nor anything else.

These things will pass.

One writer of the Bible puts it as 'our troubles are momentary, they won't last but will achieve an eternal glory that will outshine every trouble (2 Cor 4:17).

Therefore, he says, 'we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal' (18).

God knows what it feels like to face hardship, poverty and cruelty.

Born into a poor family who were forced to flee as refugees, Jesus shared every human experience in being God with us.

He carried the weight of human suffering and humbled himself even to dying a criminal's death on the cross.

But God raised him to the heights of heaven.

Jesus embodied the eternal Spirit of God.

In conversation with the grieving Martha, who was consumed by grief over the loss of her brother, Jesus revealed himself as the Resurrection and the Life (11:25).

Jesus confronted Martha with a choice.

Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? (11:40).

Either, Martha could stay in her grief and loss all that comes with that - emotional distress, economic ruin because of the likelihood that Lazarus had been the main bread-winner.

Or she could trust this Jesus and see the glory of God.

But it would mean facing up to what's hidden behind the stone.

It would mean facing up to, not just the loss of her brother, but to face up to death itself.

Death is not something most of us like to think about. Many of us live imprisoned by our fear of death, and we think that by not facing about it, that it might not happen.

But it will happen.

And times like we're living through at the moment, can remind us of that.

Which is why the Biblical claim that love is stronger than death (Song of Songs 8:6) is so essential for us to hold onto to.

In Paul's famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13, a favourite reading for weddings, he puts it as, three things will endure, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Love is stronger than death.

Love will endure all things.

Love will cast out all fear.

Love will win in the end.

And to quote Richard Rohr, "Love is who we are and who we are becoming".

In the midst of her grief, at the end of her rope, Martha somehow dug deep and found it in her to say, 'yes Lord', and when she did, she saw the glory of God and felt the power of his everlasting love.

My hope is that John will see what Martha saw.

That the dry bones of his current situation will find themselves wrapped in flesh and muscle, skin and breath, come to life and know God.

May we all know God more fully through this time.

Four signs of where love is winning?

(1) It seems that the the birds are singing more loudly and the smoggy skies are more clearer

I wonder and hope that after this crisis is over, there will be a new global commitment to tackle climate change and take seriously how our actions affect our planet and it's people.

(2) Rainbows in windows

sign of hope that there will come a day when we get through what we are going through, with God's help.

The God who rescued Noah and his family and creatures of every kind, is the same God who has offered himself to us and for us, in Christ.

(3) A modern take on the principle of beating swords into ploughshares.

Stopping the production of weapons in order to manufacture ventilators for the NHS.

CAAT reported this week that, "Rolls Royce, which produces military aircraft engines, and aerospace companies like Airbus which profits from the sale of fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, have been called on by the UK government to help produce ventilators - showing change can come when the political will is there. The case for moving our engineering skills from industries that take lives to ones that save them has never been stronger.

We can see more than ever that our security is not advanced by wars, or by spending billions on nuclear weapons systems and aircraft carriers, but by building fairer societies that support the most vulnerable, and by investing in our public services.

Let's work together to ensure that out of this crisis we build a safer world, where real human needs are prioritised".

Good things will come from this time of crisis. God's promise to those who choose to respond to God's love is that "God's causes everything to work together for good".

(4) [SLIDE] Guiseppe Berardelli - greater love has no person than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

May we live through these days with the hope of goodness beyond what we see, as love comes into all things.