

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 29 March 2020

Let us pray. Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth, find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Life begets life

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Today is Lent week 5 – we have been walking with Jesus while accompanying him in his journey to cross. We were with him when Jesus was meeting with people on the way. In the first week of Lent, Jesus was driven to the wilderness by the spirit. There he fasted 40 days and 40 nights. When he was famished, he was tempted by Satan. The theme was 'Trial or Temptation?' When we experience any events in faith, we call them trials. When we see any events from human greed and desire, it is called temptation. For both, the root word was the same. In the second week, Jesus met Nicodemus. We thought about faith, whether it is 'from below' or 'from above'. In the third week, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and 'the water of life' was what we explored. Last week, we met a man born blind, and we had a chance of thinking about 'living in the light of God.' Today, we'll explore this theme - 'life begets life' through two readings – Ezekiel and John. And then it will allow us to think about our faith life in Christ that begets life continually.

1. Life in Ezekiel 37:1-14

In Ezekiel 37, under the title of 'the Valley of Dry bones,' we are told that the spirit of God brings Ezekiel to a valley which is full of bones. In his vision, Ezekiel sees that the bones are very dry. When he saw such a vision, Israel was living in the Babylonian Exile that began in 597 BCE. The young Ezekiel was part of the exiles, and he was called by God to be a prophet in Babylon. For the exiles, the future seemed so bleak with no hope. The exile was not only physical suffering and a crisis of communal identity. It was also a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Judean faith – Jerusalem, its temple, its people and the Davidic monarchy had been destroyed.¹ As such, it was an extraordinary vision in which dry bones were made living people.

In this passage, one word especially catches our eye – the spirit – רוח (*ruach*), which is also rendered 'wind' and 'breath.' The word spirit רוח appears four times. First, the Lord's spirit (רוח-רוח *ruach*) shows Ezekiel a vision of an entire valley filled with dry bones. Next, God orders him to prophesy to the breath (*ruach*). When he prophesies, the breath comes into them, and they live (v 10). And finally, God promises this: 'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'² Here God's spirit is the key for life as in the garden of Eden when the first man was formed from the earth.³ Without the spirit of God, life consists of just flesh and blood in which there is no life at all. Ezekiel 37 is not only about the resurrected life but also homecoming from the exile. God does not only make the dead to be alive. God also provides the means of life – the land that was taken by the empire. It was the vision that Ezekiel received. Now let's see what life means in John.

¹ Psalm 89; 137

² Ezekiel 37:14

³ Genesis 2:7 - then the Lord God created man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

2. *Life in John 11:1-45*

As in Ezekiel, John 11 begins with an illness of Jesus' friend and his death. Jesus is informed that Lazarus is ill. But he does not hurry to go to him as he stays two days longer in the place where he is. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrive at Bethany, they are told that Lazarus has been dead for four days. In Jewish belief, they believed that the soul left the body after three days. Similar to 'the bones were very dry' in Ezekiel, in which no hope for life is possible, it emphasizes that Lazarus is really dead and he is going to smell. After praying to God, the father, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴ The words are powerful enough to blow all the doubts, concerns, grief and disbelief. The dead man comes out from the grave as if sheep recognizes the voice of the shepherd. Once again, the breath of God, the spirit of God brings life to death as the name Lazarus indicates, which means 'God has helped.' By being raised, Lazarus also receives new life. It includes a table fellowship with Jesus.⁵ Later he even becomes a target of murder simply because he has received new life.⁶

The raising of Lazarus is often associated with the resurrection of Jesus. But the larger story confirms that life will not be overcome by death. What remains beyond the raising of Lazarus is not only Jesus' death but his resurrection and his persistent giving of life. Jesus is life who begets life. Now, what about us?

3. *Life in Christ*

We began to think about *life begets life* by reading Ezekiel 37 and John 11. It gives us a chance to ponder life in Christ. Did you find yourselves in these readings? What about the story of a donkey who fell into the well? Previously I gave a question to you all - *what made the donkey change its mind so sudden and work for life?* What are your answers to the question?

My answer is like this. First, I think the donkey has been working for its master for a very long time – faithfully. I have no doubt that the farmer has loved him, and the donkey loved his master. Initially, the donkey was panicked when the first shovel-full dirt came down from above. But soon he calmed down himself. After all, the master had been good to him for all these years. This faith – (I think ☺) may have helped the donkey see the event from a new perspective. In the end, the donkey thought that the master was going to help him out from the well. That made him step up for life, and it eventually saved his life.

The story – *Take a step up for life* resembles what we Christians live in Christ. Life has a good time and bad time. Yet in the end, our faith in Christ helps us not to give up hope in Christ who is the giver of life. Presently we are confined at home because of COVID-19. Who would have expected this kind of online service before? It is a bit strange but it is also exciting too! Indeed, we are practising to worship our Lord in spirit and truth! Every day the word of God which is breath of life frees us who are willing to live by it. In this way, *life begets life* for those who live by the Word of God. Amen.

⁴ John 11:43 καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν φωνῆ μεγάλης ἐκραύγασεν· Λάζαρε, δεῦρο ἕξω.

⁵ John 12:1-2 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. (2) There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

⁶ John 12:9-10 When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. (10) So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well...