

Lent 5, Passion Sunday, Year A

Ezekiel 37.1-14; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

The story of Holy Scripture is about new starts. Starting afresh, pushing into the unknown, putting the past behind us. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. The Israelites leave Egypt, but complain that life was better in captivity—and are not rewarded for these backward longings. We say, do we not, that we should never go back—but we so often wish to.

The New Testament story is all about new starts. Christmas, newness, innocence, born into the world to infuse new hope. And of course, the crucifixion/resurrection/ascension sequence is all and only about new life. New life that arises after, and only after, old life has died. No more looking back. Death is a necessary precursor before new life can blossom.

The Old Testament reading from Ezekiel is a conjuring trick with bones. *Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones*. New life breathed into dead bones. With the Lazarus story we have new life breathed into a dead body. And he is dead. *Lazarus is dead*, Jesus says. Mary and Martha in their grief are looking back: *if only you'd been here, it would have been OK*. Harking back to the past is never helpful. It kills enthusiasm, it stifles initiative. Churches have lots of people like that. We need to put the past to death, and move on. Chuck out the clutter that drags you downwards and backwards. Resurrection requires death first. Lazarus is dead.

We live in a society that refuses to look death full in the face. We don't like to say the word *dead*. We use passed, or passed over, or passed on, or released. This is evasion. We hope that if we don't say the word, death will not happen. We go to great lengths to try and delay death, even when it's obviously inevitable. We spend money on seeking a cure for this or that disease as if there is some hope that we can live for ever. Death rates from heart disease are falling—hooray—but this only means that we'll die of something else instead.

Evasion always leads to trouble. If you pretend death won't happen, you can't set things straight before you go. You can't say that you wished you'd not said so-and-so, and you can't say, before it's too late, what you should have said years ago. All that is the overwhelming cause of grief and weeping and family tensions at funerals.

For six months of my life I worked in a children's hospital in south London. I saw babies with incurable conditions having operation after operation, and I was required to perform painful procedures on tiny babies whilst seeing their eyes looking at me. I was gravely distressed at the inhumanity and cruelty of it. The parents were lied to by the doctors and given false hope, so that when the inevitable did happen, their distress was all the more intense. Our refusal to be straightforward about death results in grief for ourselves and for those that love us.

Rural people have a robust attitude to death. They see it day by day. Animals are killed so that we can eat. Now, I know that my attitude to death is odder than that of most people be: for 25 years I taught anatomy using dead humans: cutting them up, examining them and handling them. Nevertheless, I'm certain that our attitude to death needs realigning. Today's Gospel and the events of the next two weeks certainly do not evade death: Our Lord faces death full in the face.

Biologically speaking, death is part of life. The cells of our bodies are dying all the time, and new life replaces them. Skin cells are constantly dying, being shed and replaced. Blood cells past their sell-by date are constantly replaced. When a fetus is developing in the uterus, the hands and feet start off as spade-like things, a bit like fists. You might think that fingers and toes grow out from the spades, but you'd be wrong. What happens is that rather than digits growing out, four strips of cells are programmed to die, leaving digits remaining between them. If not enough cells die, we get webbed fingers and toes. If more strips die we get more fingers than usual. When a bone is fractured and reset, the two ends are rarely aligned properly. The body copes with this by killing off bone cells in the wrong place, and laying down new ones where needed. Biology has no hesitation in killing off the old in order that the new can flourish.

We can't grow and develop as people if we live the past. We must face death in order to grow. The caterpillar has to 'die' if the butterfly is to emerge. As with Lot's wife, we can't live in the present if we refuse to accept the death of the past.

I am calling for honesty and clarity of vision. And this, I think, is what Jesus called for throughout his ministry. Facing the future mindfully means killing all that holds us back. It can be very painful. We begin to see ourselves as others see us. We realise that we are not as good as we thought we were. We realise how we deceived ourselves and the truth was not in us. We need to grieve our lost attitudes, our lost expectations, our lost dreams. We need to let go of what we want, or wanted, and accept the grace of God to resurrect us. We must die in order to live, as Christ Jesus died in order to live. Death of our self-obsession enables us to rise, in the words of George Herbert,

As larks, harmoniously, And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

When we cling to the past, looking back, we tether ourselves. We prevent ourselves from rising. Our vision is restricted.

Enlightenment comes when we let go. We become less restricted. We move into a wide, unfettered place. If we die to earthly attachments, we are in this place, and we can focus on what matters: love of God, and love of neighbour.

This is renewal. If we are to attain eternal life, a quality of life here and now,

we must face death—we die to worldly trivia. Having divested ourselves of these burdens we walk on lighter. 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' – light in all senses, enlightened, shining with the light of the world, and lighter because we are less burdened by impedimenta from the past.

Eternal life comes only after we have allowed ourselves to die to old ways. In these two weeks of Passiontide, throw off the shackles the past—attitudes, prejudices—in readiness for the glorious resurrection that will follow.

And now, a story about death.

A rabbi dies and finds himself waiting in line to enter Heaven. The man ahead of him has a shaved head, gold chains, leather jacket, and shades.

The angel Gabriel asks the bald guy, 'Name and occupation?'

'Rafi Eskenazy, taxi driver.'

Gabriel checks his list and grins, 'Shalom aleichem! Silk robe, gold staff.

Welcome to Heaven!'

Next comes the rabbi.

'Name and occupation?'

The rabbi draws himself up with great dignity and says, 'Avraham Baruch Cohen, Senior Rabbi of Beth Jacob Synagogue for 37 years.'

Gabriel checks his list and nods, 'Yup. Cotton robe, wooden staff. Keep it moving please.'

'Hold it,' says Rabbi Cohen, 'the man before me was a taxi driver. Why does he get special attention?'

'Up here, it's all about results,' says Gabriel. 'When you sermonized, people slept. When he drove, people prayed.'