

Sunday 2 April 2017 (5th Sunday of Lent)

St Andrew's, Cobham

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

Death and the Royal Priesthood

They say that the Victorians spoke a lot about death and denied the existence of sex, whereas these days the opposite is true.

Well, today we are going to be like the Victorians and talk about death.

You see, our three readings all deal with death, but much more than that. They show a gradual unfolding of understanding of the problem of death - and of God's solution to that problem.

You will sometimes hear people say that death is natural, simply part of the great cycle of life. In one sense, they are right, of course. In the natural world, death follows life inevitably. But in another sense they are very wrong. Because God does not like death. In God's eyes, the fact that death exists is completely unnatural – a tragedy, the result of something going terribly wrong with the world He created. We see this in Jesus' reaction at the tomb of Lazarus, summed up in the shortest verse in the Bible. Just two words. Who knows what those words are? Yes, 'Jesus wept', John 11.35. In the face of his friend Lazarus' death, Jesus does not console anyone with easy words about death being natural – he weeps at the tragedy of it.

So why does death happen? How does the Bible explain death?

Many people think that this is what the Bible says:

When God created humans, he told them to keep a moral code if they wanted to continue to live in the Garden of Eden. If they failed, death would enter the world as a punishment. Of course, humans sinned, and death entered the world as a punishment. Finally, to resolve the problem, God sent Jesus to earth, where he obeyed the moral law perfectly and in his death paid the penalty on behalf of the human race. Those who believe in Jesus get the benefit of the price he paid, and they go to heaven to be with God.

It may surprise you to know that this is not what the Bible says.

This is what the Bible actually teaches:

God created the world and he created humans to do a particular job in his creation. What was that job? It was to be 'image-bearers' of God in the world, reflecting God's wise stewardship into the world, and reflecting the praises of all creation back to the Creator. This job, this role, is sometimes described in the Bible as a 'royal priesthood'. Of course, part of this involves obeying a moral code, but it is so much more than that. We were designed and created to take responsibility for God's wonderful creation, to live in it and enjoy it, while worshipping God. [Tom Wright, 'The Day the Revolution Began' p.76].

So what went wrong?

It wasn't that humanity broke God's list of rules and so had to be punished by a vengeful God. It was that humanity rejected the role that God made them for, their vocation, as it were. We were called to have responsibility and authority for creation while being focussed on God and keeping him at the centre of everything. Instead, we chose to give our allegiance and worship in a different direction – to things and powers within creation itself, including ourselves. We tend to think of sin as breaking moral rules. But breaking moral rules is really a symptom of something deeper, namely, this putting other things at the centre, where God should be.

The result of this rejection by humanity of its true vocation was that we became slaves to forces and powers in the world, and to death itself.

I do hope this isn't all sounding strange and incomprehensible, but I do assure you, it is what the Bible teaches and is in fact very exciting. It means that our ultimate destiny as humans is not ultimately to escape death and decay by going to a disembodied heaven, through believing in Jesus, and in the process leaving the poor old earth behind to suffer its fate. No, our destiny, as believers in and followers of Jesus is one day to be part of a great resurrection, where we take up our true role, the thing we were created to do, at the centre of a renewed creation.

We are all going to be royal priests.

Our readings today all point in that direction.

Ezekiel was written at a time when Israel had been taken into captivity in Babylon. God's people, chosen to be holy, had turned away from Him and worshipped dead idols. As a result, they had become alienated from God and become slaves. God sends Ezekiel a vision to encourage Israel, one of the strangest images in the Bible – a valley of skeletons which God rebuilds into fully functioning humans again, breathing new life into them. They stood up – a vast

army. And God says: This image shows that I will open your graves and bring you out of them, and settle my spirit on you, and bring you home where you belong, doing what you are meant to be doing. Resurrection, not heaven.

Then in our Gospel reading we discover just how God is going to achieve resurrection. It will be achieved through Jesus Christ. Jesus says to Martha, Lazarus' grieving sister: 'I am the resurrection and the life' [John 11.25]. In other words, it is through the work that Jesus does on the Cross that the final Resurrection, when all the dead are restored to life, will become possible. And just to show that what he says is true, Jesus raises Lazarus to life again. Of course, the truth is shown in all its power when Jesus himself is resurrected.

But there is even more wonderful news, as St Paul explains in his letter to the Romans. For those who believe in Jesus, this new life and this new power that will bring about the resurrection are already in us. We are no longer controlled by sin, no longer slaves. Instead, we are controlled by the Holy Spirit, and just as the Spirit raised Christ from the dead, so it will raise us too.

I hope you aren't disappointed that your destiny is not to float around in heaven. I hope that you are as excited as I am that one day I will do what I was created to do: be a royal priest of God in his amazing creation and what's more, the power that will achieve that is already burning within me.

God bless you, Royal Priests!