

Some people may have noticed that Rebecca and I are posting daily on the website at the moment. We are offering reflections on the pivotal passage sent for the day. And we're doing that because we think that the Bible is God's living word, the means through which he speaks to us and his voice I think is particularly clear in times of crisis. And often the Bible comes to life when we read it in a different context. And in a time of crisis that's a fresh and different context, and the Bible can speak to us in a new way.

And I had that experience very clearly this week when reading the Old Testament passage set for today, that a story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. So some of the phrases and the words in that passage just leapt off the page to me. Like this. "The people of Israel said, 'Our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.'"

Well, we all know that feeling now of being cut off. We're all struggling with isolation as we are on our own in quarantine. I'm sure that our sock drawers. I've never been as tidy as they are now. And I have declared war on the weeds in my garden. I promise you that by the time you'll be seeing this recording, there won't be one weed left in my garden. I have a friend who's learning the whole periodic table. We're all feeling cutoff. We're all wondering what we can do with this time of isolation.

The people of Israel weren't cut off because of a virus. They were cut off because they were in exile. Ten years before. This encounter that Ezekiel has with God occurs, the people of Israel had been taken off into the land of Babylon in exile, where their hearts sank. That's the context in which God appears to Israel. "Our hope is lost," said the people. They were in a strange land.

And God appears in this context that Ezekiel gives, this amazing vision of a valley of dry bones. The bones are the people of Israel. And God leads his prophet Ezekiel around this Valley of dry bones. And then he asks him a leading question, "Can these dry bones live?"

And I love how Ezekiel answers? His first thought, I reckon would have been to say, "Well, of course not. No. Bones don't live. They can't come back to life." Then maybe he realized who he was talking to, God, with whom all things are possible. Maybe he thought he should give a different answer. So he says, "O Lord God, you know." Or as the old translation say, "Thou knowest." That's a great answer.

He avoids saying what he doesn't feel. He's looking at a valley of dry bones, he feels the pain of the exile. His hope has all but drained away. He can't bring himself to bounce up and down and say, "Yeah, God, you can do it. These dry bones live." He's more reasoned, more mentioned, perhaps more honest. "Thou knowest," he says. God knows. That's all he could say. Ezekiel knew that from a human point of view, the bones couldn't live. But he knew too that God's view was different and that God knew. And Ezekiel was right, God did know. God knew that he could bring hope in the midst of this valley of despair.

We're facing a lot of unanswered questions ourselves at the moment. How long will this pandemic last? How bad will it get? How long will we be quarantined? Thou knowest, God knows. That's the best answer we can give. It's not the answer that we might want to give. But it's what we can say. And it's no mere wishful thinking. It is not something that comes out of a blindly optimistic point of view. It's an answer

that comes from a deep hope. A hope that this is God's world. God is with us. God knows.

We are an Easter people. We'll soon be celebrating the great events of Easter on which this hope is founded. The question put to Ezekiel is a Good Friday question. Can this crucified body live? God knew. The disciples may have given up hope when they took the body of Jesus down from the cross and placed him in a tomb. But God knew that this wasn't the end of the story, that he could bring life to a crucified body. And let's stay with the Easter story for a moment.

Someone might've looked the despondent followers of Jesus on that first Good Friday and said, "Can these broken ragbag collection of people ever be relied upon to spread the good news?" God knew, God knew that the disciples who were so downcast on Good Friday would be so awakened by the good news of the resurrection and their encounter with the risen Christ, that they would be bold enough to preach a message that transformed the world. God knows.

There's one other phrase I'd like to pick out from this Old Testament reading as well. God says to the people, "I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live." We are living under certain constraints at the moment. Many people would say that it barely counts as living. They're not living life to the full. But when Jesus promised that he would bring life and life in all its fullness, he wasn't meaning a life where we can go out to socialize, where we go to a bar and eat at a restaurant, go to the cinema, go to school, or play golf. That's not the kind of life he was talking about. He was talking about a different kind of life all together. He was talking about the life of the Spirit, which no virus can contaminate.

I've been thinking this week about a woman I used to go and visit in my first parish when I was a young curate. I don't remember her surname, but her first name was Beryl. And I used to love going to see Beryl. She wasn't an old woman, but she was very ill. She suffered from an illness that meant that she was confined to her bed. So she was under quarantine all the time. And yet Beryl was fully alive. Whenever one went to see how you couldn't help but be energized with the life that was within her, whatever her constraints.

She lived the truth of the epistle from Romans that we heard. "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." Beryl's mortal body was weak. But she lived a rich, abundant spiritual life. God's Spirit dwelt powerfully in her. Our normal life might be constrained at the moment, but let's seek to develop our spiritual life at this difficult time.

We're being reminded at the moment that we need in these strange times of quarantine to develop a rhythm, a routine. Well, let's be sure that our routine includes paying attention to our spiritual life, that our routine includes prayer, and meditation, and Bible reading. There are resources on our website to help with that. There is a morning and evening prayer. We've put things there to help create a routine. Stay well, stay spiritually alive, and remember, God knows.