

I've been struck recently about how being human brings with it a fair amount of fear. We are afraid of what we don't know. We are afraid of change. We are scared of loss, of being left behind, of not being in control. We are afraid of death.

Now, being the owner of cats, I have seen my fair share of small dead creatures. Once, when we were moving house, I found the neat, tiny skeleton of a frog under our washing machine. It had clearly taken refuge under there after being brought inside by a feline hunter, and had unfortunately died. What remained was a perfect set of bones. Dry, froggy bones. A perfect reminder that we are all made of dust and bones, and to dust and bones we shall return!

Death is perhaps the biggest thing that many of us fear. It is inevitable, no matter how much we avoid thinking or talking about it. It is a change we have no control over. It is the end of everything that is known, it is the ultimate dead end (excuse the terrible pun!), and it is final - there's no coming back from it - unless you are Lazarus.

Yet in both our gospel and our old testament reading today, we find ourselves being shown that for God, death is no obstacle, and indeed, is not even the end.

By the time Jesus arrives on the scene, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Since Jewish belief was that the soul left the body after three days, he is well and truly properly dead in every sense. We see his sisters berating Jesus with the same cry, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died!'. If you had been here, this terrible thing would not have happened. If you had been here, everything would be different, we would not be grieving, we would not have lost a loved one, everything would be the same as it was before... The sisters know that Jesus has power, and had the power to have prevented their brother's death. What they don't yet see is that death itself is not beyond his power as the son of God.

And then we see something beautiful. Before the unexpected resurrection, before speaking the word and causing the breath of life to re-enter his friend, we see Jesus fully inhabiting that time and space of loss and grief. We see the son of God, who holds the power to raise the dead within himself, entering into the reality of the moment where his friend has died, where he has lost a loved one, and he mourns alongside the bereaved sisters. Jesus feels pain, he is deeply moved, his heart knows what it is to be a human in the world with relationships of love that cause such sorrow when they are ended. Jesus weeps. God weeps. The hands that flung stars into space, the creative spirit that formed humankind and breathed life into us, the one who holds all things together, knows what it is to be human, and with a pierced heart cries tears of sadness alongside Mary and Martha.

Then, he brings forth new life. In the place of absence and sorrow, Jesus causes the dead to walk, restoring joy and bringing with it a new faith and a new understanding of the power of God.

Now of course, we are heading swiftly towards Easter, and we've all heard the spoiler - yes he dies, but then it's all ok because he'll come back to life. So while we journey through the darker place of Lent, with the drama and grief of Holy Week on the horizon, perhaps we skim over the fact that Jesus does really die. Lazarus really died. The bones in Ezekiel are well and truly deceased. But while both these readings today end with life, liturgically pointing us ahead two weeks in the calendar to the resurrection, there is something in the pause, the space, that moment of real loss, that is worth reflecting on.

When we are in those dark moments ourselves, when we are in pain, anxiety, or fear, it is easy to assume that all is lost. When we are in those places, and it consumes all we can see and hear, we can find it hard to recognise that those places are also inhabited by God.

That's why I find it so beautiful that Jesus weeps. He isn't thinking to himself 'just wait and see, these people are going to get such a surprise!'. He isn't condescending, he isn't aloof or above the

reality of what has happened. Instead Jesus mourns. God walks with us in the dark, even, or especially, when we can't see God because the darkness is too black.

There is so much we are afraid of. We are afraid of what we don't know. We are afraid of change. We are scared of loss, of being left behind, of not being in control. We are afraid of death. All of this holds true for our own lives, and it also holds true for the church.

I'm sure you've been part of those conversations where there is fear and anxiety about the future of the church. The decline in attendance, the change in giving habits, the difficulty in recruiting people to volunteer, the loss of religious literacy in the younger generations... the list goes on. It's so easy to have those conversations where we harken back to 'the good old times', the times when there was a better program, or a surplus budget, or every pew filled. The times when the clergy were perfect, we sang everyone's favourite hymn every week, and the congregation was made up entirely of saints... It's easy to worry that in a few short decades, the church will resemble the valley of dry bones we find in Ezekiel.

And yet. The bones are never the end of the story. If we take anything from today's readings, it should be that our God is a God who does the impossible. Our God is a God who creates life out of death, and if that is possible, then so is anything else. Our God creates hope, promises restoration, provides vision, and walks with us both through the valleys and across the mountain tops.

And this is why we should not fear. 'Do not be afraid!' Jesus tells us, over and over again. We need not fear for the church, because it is not our church, it is God's. It may well die, in the sense that we know it. It may change beyond our recognition in some ways. It may not include things that we currently hold dear. We may even find ourselves weeping over some bones. But where there is knowledge and love of God, where there is faith and hope and trust, where there are people carrying that burning spark of the Spirit within them, then there will always be the Church, because we are the body of Christ. Where you and I and others gather together, to share what we believe and rejoice in, there will be everything that matters.

Dry bones are never the last word.

Yes, Jesus walks with us, weeps with us, dies with us, but all the fear and death in the world can never change the truth that God is a God of power to do the impossible, to bring light into darkness and hope into grief, joy from mourning and life from death. We are an inescapably Easter people, for God gives the Spirit within us, and we shall live!

Amen.