



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**10 May 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Fourth Sunday after Easter**

**Ezekiel 27:1-12; John 5:19-29**

**The Revd Canon Sarah Foot, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History**

**'The Gifts of Life'**

*+ Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." (John 5: 25)*

This is proving a long, slow Eastertide, almost Lenten in the way that the days are dragging. The glorious weather that we enjoyed at the end of Holy Week and on Easter Day itself has passed. The nation's mood seems better reflected in the more normal English spring that we are now experiencing, with its changeable skies and plentiful showers (or at least that's what's happening today, as I write). For this is a year in which we have never needed more the promise of resurrection hope to which both our readings speak, especially that from John's gospel which you just heard read.

None of us remains untouched by the cruel realities of Covid-19. Even if we have not, so far, had direct personal experience of the virus, nor yet had to endure the pain of having to watch from a distance while our loved ones die in the company of strangers, every one of us now knows someone who has been seriously ill as a result of this disease. And many of us have recently lost friends and colleagues. I write at the end of difficult week, which saw the sudden death of a professor who worked closely with members of my Faculty, and the funeral of another much-loved friend and colleague, whom I have known ever since I was an undergraduate, who died of a heart attack at the very beginning of the outbreak. By the time you hear this sermon, Philippa, our Succentor, will have conducted a brief, grave-side funeral for a member of our regular congregation, Veronica Quainton, in the presence of very few of her family and friends who mourn her passing.

Those of us too young to have lived through the last war may never previously have felt in quite the same way the resonances of those familiar words from the BCP funeral service: "In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?" That prayer translates a Latin

antiphon for the dead sung in churches at least from the early years of the fourteenth century, usually in a service on New Year's Eve: *Media vita in morte sumus*; In the midst of life we are in death. There is some evidence that the verses were occasionally sung as a prayer at a time of national need. One can readily see their suitability, especially in eras when the wider population was perhaps rather more open than I suspect we are today to clerical suggestions that collective misfortune resulted directly from a people's sinfulness.

The celebrated historian of women's religious history, Eileen Power, tells a wonderful story in her study of Medieval Nunneries about the difficulties encountered by a fifteenth-century Augustinian canon, Johannes Busch, in reforming a community of nuns at Wennigsen in Hannover in 1455. Although the local duke of Brunswick supported Busch, the bishop was opposed to change, as were the local aristocracy, many of whose sisters, nieces and cousins lived in the convent. When the duke, Busch, and several companions went to the house they entered the nuns' choir to instruct the sisters to accept a reform of their way of life. But the women declared that they would neither reform, nor properly observe their own rule. The duke's party persisted, refusing to listen to the women's protests, so the nuns threw themselves to the floor of their chapel, spreading out their arms to make themselves cross-shaped and intoned in a loud voice the antiphon: *Media vita*, in the midst of life we are in death. The duke's party was initially terrified, mistaking their words for a popular contemporary curse, but Busch was more confident. He responded to the nuns: 'Why were you not afraid to sing the anthem "*Media vita*" over me? I hold my fingers towards God's holy gospels, and swear that you must reform yourselves, or I will not suffer you in my land.' After not a little difficulty – including an unseemly physical skirmish with some of the nuns, which drew a good deal of blood – they did eventually agree to reform and accept a group of women from a nearby house to teach them a more austere way of living. The loss of their former life, with its luxury and lack of discipline, may well have felt to some of the sisters like a kind of bereavement.

Yet as they struggled under a new form of austerity, the sisters could turn to Scripture for solace and reassurance and to the extract from St John's gospel prescribed for this morning. There Jesus offered words of comfort and a promise of eternal life to all those who hear his word and believe in the one who sent him, as well as clarifying his own relationship with the Father and so testifying to his own divinity. Jesus did not, of course, on that occasion have in mind the particular and peculiar circumstances in which we now find ourselves, locked down and isolated in our homes, nor would he have envisaged the

especial pain that so many of us feel at being locked out of our churches. But in our current situation, the hope that this passage offers proves particularly welcome. We are all now longing to be able to dare to hope, or at least to find a rumour of hope on the horizon. In the darkness of our current plight, a promise of eternal life, of passing from death to life, is what we need.

Had we been able to gather for worship at Matins for the 5th Sunday of Easter, we would have found hope also in the first reading, a familiar passage from thirty-seventh chapter of the prophecy of Ezekiel. The prophet describes being transported to a valley of dry bones at a time when Israel was (not unlike us) suffering in despair following the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem. The Lord asked him whether those bones could live, and he answered ambiguously, "O Lord God, you know." Yahweh then instructed Ezekiel to prophesy to the dead bones and tell them that they would live. That prophecy might seem rather ironical, given that Ezekiel had for years been prophesying to living Israelites, who had proved no better able to listen than could heaps of dry bones. Yet, he spoke the words given to him, and miraculous the dry bones came together, bone to its bone, although still lifeless until a wind blowing over the valley mystically entered the bodies and filled them with breath. So, they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. To the devastated Israelites, an image of unburied corpses, turned to parched and dislocated bones evoked both the remains of all those killed during the Babylonian capture, and also the disoriented and dislocated people still living in Israel together with all those suffering exile in Babylon. God's words gave them hope in their despair. He promised that he would open their very graves and bring the dead up and back into the land of Israel. Although the image here was clearly metaphorical, as John Barton has noted, referring to the people who were cut off completely being rejoined and given new life in the land of Israel, many later interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, have read this passage as promising the resurrection of the dead.

We are on more secure ground when we turn back to our other reading and Jesus' promise: 'the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.' We all want to believe that something is happening now, that an hour is now here when things will be different. Is John the evangelist trying to pull us his readers into sharing this present? Can we take him to speak directly to every faithful hearer of his text in future generations in suggesting that this is happening right now, as Jesus' words are heard and received by the faithful? If so, and I think we can, what does that mean for us?

In the context in which this passage occurs, Jesus had just been arguing with the Jews about performing miracles on the Sabbath. He cured the man who had been sick for many years, enabling him to take up his mat and walk (Jn 5: 8); and the Jews had started to persecute him for working on the Sabbath. This provides the immediate context for the opening verse of today's reading: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.' So who, in the context in which Jesus was speaking, are the dead, those who will hear the voice of God and, having heard it, will live? Are they those whom Jesus had previously healed? The hostile Jewish audience? Or are we the dead? Is it we who will live, if – if – we allow ourselves truly to hear and listen to the voice of the Son of God?

In many ways, this passage appears to speak about those who are spiritually dead, those of whom the apostle wrote to the Ephesians 'He made you alive when you were dead through trespasses and sins' (Eph. 2: 1). But I think we can be justified in interpreting Jesus' words as also making a promise about eternal life for those who have died; he assures us that there will be a resurrection for them. Not a metaphorical restoration of dry bones to ancient Israel but a resurrection for 'Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.' (Jn 5: 24)

In this bleakest of Easter seasons, this is a hope onto which we all can hold. While we continue to lament our physical distance from others (especially and most painfully the lack of touch, which is so very hard for those who live alone), we are not either socially or spiritually distanced from the body of Christ, with whom we share in different forms of worship, online or through audio. As we struggle to reconcile ourselves to the realities of our current predicament, we need to hear and hold onto the truths promised in our readings. As St Paul said, 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation (including coronavirus) can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8: 38-9)

Yes, in the midst of life we are in death; and no, there is no one of whom we may seek for succour but our Lord and God. But as the opening sentence of the Prayer Book order for the burial of the dead reminds us, Jesus said elsewhere in John's gospel: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die." That lesson may be lost on the virus called Covid-19. It must not be lost on us. Amen