

The Lectionary with Vicar

The appointed readings for this upcoming Sunday are taken from Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:1-11; and John 11:1-45. I encourage you to open your Bibles and read through these passages with me.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

This is perhaps the most well-known story from the prophet Ezekiel, which probably isn't saying too much. The Lord uses Ezekiel to raise a valley of dry bones to life – then tells us that these bones are the entire house of Israel, whom God will raise from the dead in order to fulfill His promises.

If you look at verse 8, the bodies have already been re-formed, but they are still corpses. It is not until the “breath” comes that they are raised to new life. This should point us back to Genesis 2, where God breathes into the nostrils of Adam to give him life. It is interesting to note that the word “breath” here is the same word in Hebrew used for “spirit.”

When approaching a passage like this, especially in the prophets, it is unclear whether the event described literally happened or whether this was just a vision. Similarly, with the promise to resurrect the dead house of Israel, it is unclear whether that should be understood as a metaphor for reviving the nation or a promise of bodily resurrection. (Note: I'm not denying that the resurrection of the body is true, only questioning whether this *specific* passage is about that or something else.) Many prophecies have multiple fulfillments, often including both an earlier, non-literal fulfillment and a later, literal fulfillment in or through Christ, so be watching for that in our other readings.

Romans 8:1-11

Paul writes about the distinction between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh brings death and sin, while the Spirit brings life and peace. But then, he ends with a startling statement that the Spirit will even raise the flesh from the dead. Perhaps you may be starting to see the connection to our Old Testament reading.

This passage is talking about two different things. First it is talking about our life now. We have received new life in the Spirit of God even while we live in this decaying and dying world. In this life, there is a distinction between those who are living according to their flesh – indulging their sinful desires and wants – and those who are living according to the Spirit – directed by God's will for their lives. Second, however, it talks about a time when there will be no more distinction, when the flesh will be raised to new life in the Spirit – a look forward to the New Creation. This is focused on Christ's saving work that is not just something that affects our life now but includes a promise for the future.

What is important is that this passage is not inviting us to make a choice. We are not supposed to pick between flesh and Spirit, rather Paul is saying that we have *already* been set free by a Spirit we received from the outside. This is not our work; it is the work of God. And this Spirit – or “breath” – comes from God and is the Holy Spirit that makes alive. This passage certainly starts to move towards a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy.

John 11:1-45

Finally, in our Gospel reading, we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. There is a lot going on in this passage, so I'm going to focus on some of the ways that it intersects with our other two readings for the upcoming Sunday.

In verses 23-27, we hear again the promise of a final resurrection when all people will be raised in the flesh. This is a promise that comes through Christ, as He says clearly, "I am the resurrection and the life." But it is also a promise for today that we have the blessings of this new life even now. We are saved from death because even though we may die, we know that it is not the end and that we have Christ's word of promise that we will live forever.

But more than that, here we see Christ displaying the power of God to call Lazarus forth from the tomb. And to further connect it back to our Old Testament reading, this is not some freshly dead body, Lazarus had been dead a while and still God would raise Him through Christ – just as He was able to give new life to a valley of dried up bones. Then Lazarus came out. Here is a literal fulfillment of the prophecy that the dead will be raised, but by itself it is only a foretaste of the promise yet to come. We can look at this story and know that, just as Christ raised one man, Lazarus, from the dead, so too we will be raised from the dead one day.

A Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Resurrection and the Life, as I go throughout the week, grant that I may be refreshed with Your Holy Spirit which You have promised to all who believe in You, that it may lead me into the way of life out of the death that surrounds me in this life and world, and finally, I may come to the New Creation where I may live with You forever. I ask it all in Your name, for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.