

A Feeling in the Bones

A tomb is never the final destination for the bones of a Jew. According to the funereal practices at the time of Christ, a dead body was first washed, wrapped with linen and spice and then *sealed* in a tomb. but then, *a full year later*, in a solemn ceremony the tomb would be opened and the now dry bones removed and placed in a stone box called a ossuary.

Bones were very important to the Jews because God told the prophet Ezekiel preach to the dry bones of Israel and say to them that they would live. They would rise as skeletons, regain their tendons, muscles and skin, then God would put breathe in them and they would live. Then nation would rise from the bone heap of history to live again and return to their land. So it was not without reason that the Jews took good care of their bones.

Two grieving sisters dreaded the fact that a year from now they must face the morbid task of opening their brother's tomb to collect his bones. But they would do this believing his bones would rise, and *their* bones would rise, *all Israel's* bones would rise, and they would *see* their brother alive somewhere among the risen multitudes of Israel.

And Jesus loved this deadman and his sisters. When Lazarus had fallen ill it sent this family into crisis. What would they *do?* if Lazarus died the two unmarried sisters would be left destitute. But their hope was in God for they were the "pious poor, the word in Hebrew is *Anawin* , the large underclass of Jews that emerged in Israel . . .

After the return from exile.

The greatest achievement of the Jews in exile, lay not only in their literary creation we know as the Bible, but also in their establishment of the synagogue system. They became the people of the BOOK. Every Jew in every place had at least some access to the Scriptures. The great crisis, the national near-death experience that was the exile had left the Jews with an absolute *obsession* that every Jew from childhood would hear a story. They must not forget who they were. That story went something like this:

Yahweh God of Israel gav us a land, but due to our unfaithfulness had judged our nation and reduced it to *dry bones* in the exile. But with Yahweh God of Israel, the dry bones would live. The nation had come back to the *land*.

But had the lesson been learned? They had returned to the land, but had they returned to their *God?* For what had brought the judgement in the first place, according to the prophets, was oppression of the poor, preying of powerful upon the weak, the enslavement of the underclass by the Jewish elite. In the years since the return for exile not much had changed.

In fact, by Jesus' day, the gap between rich and poor had only grow wider. The *multitudes* , were known just as much for their poverty as they were for their longing for the glory of God. The multitudes were the salt of the earth: pious, but powerless, humble but humiliated, oppressed by Rome and their own ruling elite.

Such were Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Life's hardships had led them to trust only in the LORD and pray for justice as they lived on the knife edge of poverty.

So, quite understandably, among such people grew the great expectation of Messiah. It is the *multitudes* not the elite are following Jesus. He gave them the extraordinary promise that one day *they would inherit the earth*.

Jesus loved these people like Mary, Martha and Lazarus. That's why they were so puzzled by . . .

The strange response to a friend's suffering

He shrugs his shoulders and says don't worry about it. Lazarus' sickness is nothing fatal. He seemed unperturbed. Not at all upset. A rather strange response.

But what was not mystery, however, was why he didn't dash off to Judea to see his friend. His recent dealings in that particular neighbourhood had just about got him stoned. But you'd think he would have done *something* -- send a word or even heal from afar. But, no . . .

Jesus gave it a couple days

When he finally began to talk about actually *going* to to Judea *then* they got worried. He had recently, in an act of protest, kicked over the tables of the money changers in the Temple (John2). When the authorities asked him *why*, he said, "*Destroy this temple*, and I will raise it in three days." This was taken as threat uttered against the most important national symbol. Could there be a more un-Jewish act – to even *speak* of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple? I was practically an act of treason. .

But, when he said "destroy this *Temple*," he wasn't talking about a building, but about a body. It was one of those ambiguous statements of Jesus would make and they would only figure much later what he meant. It was one of the mysterious clues that led his disciples to finally discover Jesus' God-nature.

"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days."

They looked at massive stone pillars, walls of cut and polished stone. . . . (forty-six years in the building, and *he* would rebuild it in *three days*?) Whatever did he mean? Jesus was . . .

Strumming two harps at the same time

He often set forth a riddle or saying his opponents would never understand; and only much later would even the Christians really grasp he meant. As the church reinterpreted the Old Testament through the teachings of Jesus, it began to understand the Old Testament Scriptures in a new way that lead them to discover who Jesus really is.

"Destroy this Temple. . ."

The Jews *were* destroying their temple by a slow moral disintegration that was pushing the nation closer and closer to another time of judgement – a Day of the LORD, during the exile when the prophet Ezekiel in Babylon has a vision in which he sees a hole dug through the stone walls of the Temple back in Jerusalem (Ezek 8). Peering through the hole he sees the elders of Israel engaged in all kinds of profane and immoral acts. Ezekiel saw the Glory of God, God's Presence leaving the temple and the city of Jerusalem, leaving it an empty shell destined to be destroyed. (10:15-16 and 11: 22-33)

Jesus kicked over the tables, not to cleanse the temple, but to destroy it. The Temple's role as the meeting place between Israel and God would end with the destruction of Jesus body on the Cross. And the *building* of the *new* temple would begin with Jesus *resurrection* from the dead. He would go to the *Cross* where the *old* order of things would end and *New* Testament mission to the world would begin.

The armies of Rome would finish the job, destroying the Temple in 70 A.D. ; but the ultimate significance of Jesus kicking over the tables was forgiveness of sin was to all nations through faith in him.

Spiritually speaking, Israel was the valley of dry bones. No wonder there's so much hostility towards him in Judea. But he *must* go there because

A friend is waiting.

As they walk along the road, he begins to talk to them about *light*. He often speaks of spiritual life as light. He asks “are there not twelve hours of daylight? Any one who walks by day is not going to stumble and fall, because he sees by *this world’s light*. “

There are brilliant people in our world: extraordinary, dedicated to God and others. Many of them are poor and humble people. Anawin. Who lived like sparrows in house of the LORD. *Good people*. The godly ones, who know the Scriptures. And as long as they live they shed light through the dark cracks of society. They bring light to religious communities that otherwise have long since gone dark. Large institutions tend to be controlled by rich and powerful people driven by greed and grasping. But as long as there are the anawin who live in the corners and rafters like sparrows, -- there is light in the world.

The trouble is if a society ends up with too few points of light shining through the cracks into the darkness, when too many of the truly godly are shut out of the power structures, the law courts, the halls of government, when there are too few to carry the light – that’s when a nation begins to fall apart. Because, as Jesus goes on to say. . .

”Those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them. “

The nation had come to such time. Too few points of light. Too few and far between. Elisabeth and Zachariah, long dead -- dry bones. It happens slowly. We think there is time yet. It’s not too late. Yet like a sunset the darkness comes slowly. Israel had come to a rude time, a harsh time. A time of law but no morality, shrewdness but no wisdom, religion but no love for God and neighbour. Israel is a dark valley of dry bones.

Yet Jesus walks on, down the road, towards Lazarus.

He says, “Well, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going to wake him up.”

To which they reply, “Well, good. If he’s sleeping, maybe he’ll get better. Maybe he’s on the mend. Lord, maybe we need to go and risk our necks down in Judea any more . . .

But, Jesus is, again, strumming two harps. It’s common in the Hebrew to speak of death as sleep. The books of Kings and Chronicles often state: “so-and-so *slept* with his fathers.” It means so-and- so *died*.

So Jesus makes it crystal clear:

“Lazarus is dead but let us go to him”.

Now, let’s remember again the *Old Testament back-story: Ezekiel’s dry bones*. The symbolism with Lazarus is unmistakable: Lazarus represents the nation of Israel which is spiritually dead and must be called back to life. The spirituality of Jerusalem has become dry and dead, its Temple a condemned structure unfit for the worship of God. Israel’s Temple has become the seat of Satan.

It’s too late for a “cleansing.” The Messiah must call the bones back to life. The miracle at a tomb in Bethany is far more just than a glad reprieve for one beloved friend. It will be . . .

A sign.

He ‘s been in the tomb four days. “Lord,” Martha says, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that *even now God will give you whatever you ask.*”

If you know the story, you might be tempted to think that she is tipping us off to what Jesus will do. In reality, she doesn’t have a *clue*. She is simply confessing to Jesus that she has put her

trust in him. He has the power to intercede with God. She is grieving but will not lose her faith. Why?

She says. "I believe you are *the Messiah, the Son of God*" (27). She believes a day will come when the dry bones of Israel will rise, stand as skeletons, regain their tendons, muscles, skin. The breathe of God will enter and her brother will be there standing among the multitudes of the vast army ready to be led by Messiah into great battle of the End.

Such is common belief among the poor of Israel.

But Jesus has a much more immediate *purpose: Your brother will rise again.*"

"Yes," she says, "I know, in the resurrection—at the end of the age. . ."

Her's is *vague future hope* that can never quite comfort the grieving heart in the moment of desolation. It's that same vague future hope powerful always use to justify the continuing abuse of the poor. If just endure the hardship, in just a few more weary days, then there will be paradise. Pie in the sky when you die.

NO. Jesus wants to give a far more present hope.

"I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, though they die, will live.

Do you believe this?

"Yes," she say. She is believing, trusting in Israel's God and the Messiah. Yet in this *chaotic, grief-stricken moment*, Jesus is suddenly deeply moved and troubled. How they've lost the present, life-giving reality of God with us revealed to us through Jesus.

"Where have you laid him?" he asks.

"Come and see," they reply.

And when they got there. . .

Jesus wept.

The Lord of Glory, King of Kings, Son of God breaking down and sobbing. At the grave, he is simply the *friend*. Most people were deeply moved by the genuine grief. But there's always those in the crowd who are cynical: "Look," some said, "didn't he open the eyes of that blind man the other day? Why didn't he keep his *friend* alive?"

Cynicism is a powerful force. It seems negligible at first – a nagging tendency to sniff around for the negative, the phony and cheap. Nothing is pure with the cynic. Nothing good enough, pure enough, real enough. cynicism is contagious. It's one of those strange diseases where the carrier never even know he has it. The carrier spreads the contagion without ever feeling the symptoms. But those who must listen are undermined in their belief.

That's why Jesus wept. He knew *Lazarus* would live. He weeps for a cynical world. For those ones who will walk away from an empty tomb, unchanged, unmoved, unbelieving, and therefore, *unforgiven*. He weeps for the dry bones who can't hear his voice and rise up and come out of the valley of despair. Jesus weeps for those who will crucify him. He weeps for the disciples who need to go through all this. He weeps for those who don't believe even when they see it with their own eyes. Nevertheless, he says. . . .

"Take away the stone, "

"Lord," Martha says, "by this time there is the stench, he's been there for *four days*." Four days journey beyond the gates of death, far into the realms from which no one has ever before returned. But Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is present as a life-giving

Spirit. Therefore a dead man named Lazarus can return through the gates of death as a *sign* that something so significant and cosmic has happened on earth that a dead man four full days in the grave must come back to life and bear witness to it.

It begins with funny feeling in his bones

Lazarus awakes from death as if he's had a good night's sleep, hear the voice of Jesus, calling, and a stunned crowd hears from within the tomb the rustle of fresh linen, the fragrance of embalming fills the air and Lazarus staggers through the doorway.

Now this would be neat and tidy place to end the story, celebrate the gift of life, say "amen," and go home. It would be -- if not for that creeping disease of . . .

Cynicism.

Some who saw Lazarus raised to life go and tell the Pharisees and the chief priests and the Pharisees call a *meeting* and that cynicism begins to do it's work.

"What are we accomplishing?" they ask. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, *everyone will believe in him*, and then the Romans will come and

And so from that day on they plot to take Jesus' life.

The Temple leaders *claimed* to be concerned for public safety. Unruly crowds clambering to see Jesus – there's bound to be bloodshed. But what's really going on is they're losing their grip on power. What if this back country rabbi who can disrupted things in the Temple and get away with it manages to whip the crowds up into full-blown revival? You see, there are many "pious poor" There are the *Multitudes*. And they believe in Jesus and will follow him, if given half a chance. The cynical Temple leaders cannot afford to let that happen. Jesus must die.

Nevertheless, the dry bones will live.

The Bible tells us that in the hour when Jesus died, an earthquake shook the earth. We read in Mat 27:52, 53 that

"the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

The cynic would say there is no historical proof. And the cynic would be right. But what is historical is the WITNESS. Something spiritually powerful took place and there has to be an explanation for this witness.

The Bible also says that at the same moment Jesus died, the Temple veil was torn, from top to bottom. That curtain of heavy embroidered felt, blackened by greasy smoke, reeking with the burnt offerings and incense, was it's torn and showered down the clouds of dust that had gathered in it's fabric for years and years.

Something happened. What could all this mean?

And the strange cry from the Cross, the tearing of the veil, tombs breaking open, dead

folk walking around. . . *What does it mean?*

Dry bone coming back to life. Through his death Jesus brought a new people into existence. Jesus calls, not just Lazarus, but all people in all places and all times. The death of Lazarus is a symbol of our own spiritual condition. But we are being called to new life, new birth, a life-giving encounter with Jesus.

Some of are spiritually dead because for them, faith is purely intellectual. They believe all the right things. They give lip service to the historical creeds and confessions and the doctrines of the Church. But until they hear the voice of Jesus, they are dry bones. They will simply carry on the old tradition for the old tradition's sake. Many churches in this country gather every Sunday. But nothing ever happened there that gives life.

Others are dead because they lack a feeling. They are no longer moved by the worship of the church, by a song, by prayer, the celebration of life. It goes on all around them. Others seem to get it, other seemed move to tears at time. But for some, it never gets to the inner chambers of their hearts. They feel cold and dry and dead.

The LORD asked Ezekiel "Can these dry bones live?"

And Ezekiel could only answered "O, Lord GOD, *only you know.*"

The God who raised Lazarus from the dead can raise up a *renewed church* even from a nation of nominal faith. Just as Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb, he can call forth a renewed experience of spiritual life surging through us.

Do you feel it in your *bones*?

Maybe all we need to do today is take a quiet moment to the voice of Jesus. Then throw off the rags of cynicism and unbelief and let God break into our lives again in new refreshing ways. But that can only happen if we take our sin and indifference to cross and the tomb to be buried. For only then can we rise with Christ, committed to serve him in new and radically devout ways

Let us begin our journey a hymn. (O breathe of God. . .)