



## **Exile and Return** **Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year A, Lent 5

Ezekiel 37: 1-14, John 11:1-45

22 March 2026

Of the readings set down for this week, the story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones is definitely the one that captures our attention. Many of you will know the traditional spiritual song *Dem Bones* which is based upon this story. That song has been stuck in my head all week. While it's tempting to now sing a couple of verses, so you all get it stuck in your heads as well, I am going to resist.

To really understand what this passage is saying we need to consider the metanarrative it belongs to. A metanarrative is an overarching theme that is repeated many times throughout scripture. For example, the exodus is one of these grand stories of scripture. While it refers to the Israelites escape from captivity in Egypt, a greater understanding of the exodus is that it is the story of liberation. An exodus is the movement from captivity to freedom. Moses was a liberator of the people. But he is not the only one. So was David and so was Jesus and many more besides. Metanarratives are stories that get told over and over again in many different ways.

The story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones fits into a different metanarrative. This passage fits into the grand story of exile and return. Ezekiel lived during the time of the exile, a point in history when Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians. Ezekiel and other leaders of Israel were forced to leave the land of promise to live in Babylon itself, under the watchful eyes of their conquerors. Their exile is a very literal one in that they were taken from the homeland and forced to live in another country altogether.

When Ezekiel had the vision of the dry bones it is clear that these bones are a metaphorical representation of the people of Israel. It is an image of death, because that was the experience of being a conquered

people who had been forced from their home. The loss of their land was accompanied by a sense of loss of identity as the people of God. They believed that God had given them the land of Canaan, but now they were experiencing exile from this land.

The theme of exile and return is not simply about separation from land or from cultural identity. It is also about being separated from and returning to God. This was felt acutely in the time of Ezekiel as the Babylonian captors had also destroyed the temple of Solomon which the people of Israel believed to be God's home on earth. This is reflected in psalms written during the time of the exile that asked the question, how can we worship our God in a strange land? We have been driven from our home, and God's home has also been destroyed. Such phrases are the beginnings of a new understanding of God: that maybe, just maybe God can be found in places other than the temple.

In Ezekiel's vision the house of Israel is the pile of lifeless, dry bones. So, the image of God knitting the bones together, of wrapping them in muscle and flesh is an image of new life. It suggests that even though the house of Israel had been destroyed, God's desire is to restore it. Ezekiel's vision conveys a message of hope. Hope of return to the land of promise. Hope of restoration of that which was lost.

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave can also be understood as fitting within the metanarrative of exile and return. This time it is not Ezekiel looking upon a vision of death, but Jesus. His friend Lazarus has gone into a different kind of exile, the exile of death. Lazarus is dead in the tomb, but returns when he is called by Christ. This story demonstrates that even though we might die, we are never beyond the reach of God. That point is made again on Good Friday. On Good Friday it is Christ who is sent into the exile of death, but for those who know the grander narrative of exile and return even in the middle of the Good Friday story, there lies the hope of return.

I value this narrative because it reminds me that the sense of being separated or exiled from God can be followed by a return to God. Many people have experienced a time when they feel as though God is absent from their lives. I certainly have. Grief, depression and all manner of hurt can feel that much worse when accompanied by a sense of having

been forsaken by God. What I have learnt is that such moments of exile have been followed by moments of return to God. In time that sense of separation can result in a greater understanding of God's eternal presence, even when we are unable to feel that presence.

This was certainly true for C.S. Lewis. Lewis spent most of his life as a bachelor and admitted in his own writing that he was incredibly surprised to fall in love and marry a woman named Joy in his late 50's. Their marriage sadly was not long, less than 4 years, before Joy died from cancer. Some of you will know this story from the early 1990's film *Shadowlands*.

Unsurprisingly Lewis was devastated by Joy's death. Her presence in his life was like a shooting star passing through the heavens in that it was unexpected, spectacular, but also tragically short in duration. Upon her death C.S. Lewis found himself living with his brother and caring for Joy's two sons from a previous marriage. He was also mired in a deep depression.

Lewis would later publish a book called *A Grief Observed*, which was really a diary of his experiences at this time. Having spent years writing about Christianity and the joy it had brought to his life, Lewis now faced a new challenge of faith, the experience of being unable to connect with God. Initially Lewis struggled to come to grips with the fact that the God he knew and loved, simply didn't seem to care about the misery he found himself in. He describes going to God in his anguish and finding what felt like a door slammed in his face. The experience he described, was an experience of exile.

What is remarkable about *A Grief Observed* is that while Lewis wrote of this alienating experience in which he felt abandoned by God, he continued to write about the experiences that followed. On the other side of his grief Lewis found that slowly, but surely, he drew closer to God again. His story is not simply a story of exile, it is also the story of return.

Today is Passion Sunday, a day when we turn our eyes towards the suffering of Christ which we remember on Good Friday. Like C.S. Lewis, part of the passion story is that even Jesus experienced the sense of being abandoned by God. But the hope of resurrection is that the movement of

God in our lives doesn't end in a place of exile. Our readings today are a reminder, that even in the face of death, hope prevails...life prevails. Even moments of exile contain the hope of return, just as each and every death contains the hope, the possibility of resurrection. Because that is the ongoing movement of God, not from life to death, but from death to life. Amen.