Called to be Alive
Saint Mary the Virgin, Saint Briavels, and St Mary’s Magdalene, Hewelsfield, Trinity 10, 2020.

Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 16:28-17:5

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As most of you probably know we are taking little safari away from the lectionary readings that the Church of England provide for us over the summer months, and taking the opportunity to spend a bit of time rebuilding ourselves following the almost 3 months of lockdown. To do that we are exploring a sermon series entitled ‘Called to be…’ The good thing about this series is that you can dip in and out of it, and if you have missed all of the preceding sermons either online or in the flesh here in church, it doesn’t really matter. We have explored things like the fact that we are Called to be Gathered, Called to be Scattered, and Called to be Worshipful. Today our theme is Called to be Alive. Called to be Alive.

We talk a lot about ‘life’ in church. It crops up a lot in our liturgy: think about the creed: “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Or the words that we sometimes used to distribute holy Communion: “the body of Christ keep you eternal life.” And is often used as shorthand for being a Christian. Think about that lovely moment at the end of the baptism service where we give the candle to the person who’s been baptised - or quite often probably to their parent instead, giving a lighted candle to a baby being a fairly fundamental breach of safeguarding protocols! - But we say, “walk in this light all the days of your life.”

So it’s a word we use a lot in church. It’s also of course been a word that we have heard an awful lot in the news since the coronavirus pandemic struck. We have received a daily count of lives lost. Politicians have said from various podiums things like, “every life lost is a tragedy”. Even given the adjustment earlier this week in the official death tally of this nation, something in the order of 41,000 people have lost their lives since you and I last worshipped together in this church.

So what do we mean by life? As Christian people, what does it mean to be called to be alive?

Well I’d just like to offer a couple of thoughts this morning, based on the readings that we have been given by Janice, to guide our thinking.

The first thing I want to just remind us of all is that both of the readings we have heard this morning take place before the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That might sound absolutely boneheadedly obvious, but I think it’s important. Because actually both of these readings are set in times of deep anxiety for the people of the time. That reading from Ezekiel, probably one of the most famous bits of that prophecy, the dry bones becoming alive by the spirit of God, is a course prophecy of hope to people in exile, separated from their temple, their land, all the things that defined their communal life, the things, if you like, that make up their identity. And actually there are some parallels with the experience of our nation, and indeed of the world, since the end of February. We have found ourselves separated, haven’t we, from our holy places, from a great deal of the people, places, may be the work, the routine that usually defines our life. Perhaps some of us have had a little taste of exile this spring. And Ezekiel’s prophecy speaks into that feeling of helplessness, abandonment, the feeling of being disconcerted, of
being lost, struggling to orient ourselves. And we usually read this reading during Lent. Because of course it is most of all a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, and of the promise of resurrection for all people. But to read it here, instead, in the middle of the summer, perhaps helps us to hear it with fresh ears. This promise of new life, of the fact that no matter how lost and abandoned people may feel that they are, the God we worship is the sort of God that can animate even the driest and deadest of bones, and turn something that seemed finished and done with into something vital, something bursting with promise and potential.

And the gospel reading this morning is a really interesting one. It’s a chunk of what we call the Farewell Discourse, the conversation between Jesus and his disciples on Maundy Thursday evening. They’ve shared the last supper together, he has washed their feet, and they have gone out into the night, into the Garden of Gethsemane. And so again this is a reading speaking to a night of high anxiety, a gathering feeling of dread perhaps, of fear. What is going to happen? And Christ says extraordinary things that night. The first of them is that statement which ends chapter 16. Let me read to you the whole of that last section: “the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

Take courage; I have conquered the world!

Words of course written down by the gospel writer after the resurrection, but set before it. Written in the light of the resurrection, but spoken at a time when the disciples cannot possibly have comprehended what was about to happen. They are about to experience the darkest night of their lives. What on earth would they have made from Christ’s assertion that he has conquered the world? Would it have felt much like that mere hours later when he was arrested and taken away, tried, convicted, and crucified? Would it have felt like that as the disciples were in lockdown, behind the closed doors of their upper room?

Both of these readings remind us that being alive as a Christian, being alive in Christ, is a process and a promise. We need to guard ourselves against a type of Christianity which is sometimes referred to as “cheap grace”, where it seems like all you need to do is sign on the dotted line and suddenly you are in God’s crew. You are signed up, and new life appears in a box, tied up with a bow, and you’re sorted. And we need to guard also against the so-called “prosperity gospel” which says that if you are in God’s team then all sorts of lovely thing will come to you, and you will never be poor, or lonely, or unhappy ever again. Both of those, I’m afraid, are humbug. Life is not the same thing as happiness. Being alive is not the same thing as being rich, or comfortable. And we only need to consider the lives of any of the martyrs to see that.

But life in Christ is a promise and a process. We see the process in that vision from Ezekiel. Called to be alive means called to be people who are slowly transforming from dry bones into living, vital, animated people. The family of God. The brothers and sisters of Christ. It is a process. We are not done yet, we are not cooked. We’ve been mixed up and popped in the oven, but we’re still rising.

And life is also a promise. “Take courage; I have conquered the world!” The victory has been won. Easter has happened. There is a new world, and it is coming, but we must wait for its fulfilment. So as Christians I think we can square the last four or
five months with our faith. We can continue to be Called to be Alive even in the midst of a pandemic like the one with which the world still struggles. Even amidst the death and the heartache, and all the good theological questions that the existence of such a virus ask us. We remember that when God calls us to be alive, he’s calling us from beyond the resurrection, from the other side of the grave, and as we respond to that call he begins to form us. Slowly, slowly, he reassembles the bones, spreads the sinews, gently, lovingly, kisses us back into life.

Amen.