

# Living as Sons and Daughters of God in New Creation

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday 23 April 2023 (The First Sunday after Easter), by Father George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House*

EZEKIEL 37.1-10; 1 JOHN 5.4-12; JOHN 20.19-23

*And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? EZEKIEL 37.3*

*And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son. 1 JOHN 5.11*

**T**ODAY we are invited to know who we are, sons and daughters of God, and live according to the life which has been given to us.

We have been raised up with Christ. Therefore, we seek those things which are above, where our life is waiting to be discovered.

We have been raised with Christ. Therefore, we pray to ‘put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth’.

*And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?*

This is a powerful verse which invites us to recognize how much we long for a new and transformed life. The prophet Ezekiel is shown a ‘valley which was full of bones’, ‘and, ‘behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry’.

The prophet Ezekiel is one of the exiles who was carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon. He speaks to God’s people in a strange land, at a time of almost unimaginable difficulty, and he offers them hope.

In the valley of dry bones, we recognize an image of separation and fragmentation. It speaks to us of how we are divided from one another, divided even within ourselves. It speaks to us of that dryness, a search for water, of the Spirit which can revive us and give us what we need to live well.

Son of Man, can these bones live? Perhaps this speaks to us today of the dryness of some of the life of the churches. Do the symbols and sacraments have the power to feed and renew us? Do the forms of our worship bring us into contact with our Lord Jesus risen from the dead? Are we able this morning to recognize and encounter the risen Lord Jesus, the one who has overcome the world for us and in us? Well, yes, of course, our day, our worship overflows with something of the joy of the Resurrection. What does it mean to live as sons and daughters of God?

The gospel readings from St Luke on Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday invited us to hear the prophets speaking to us of the work of Christ. We read Ezekiel today because this prophecy is one of those which speaks to us of the Resurrection. Ezekiel’s prophecy goes beyond a hope that the exiles may return home. He speaks to us of a

hope for homecoming and new life which is fulfilled in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead.

How do we go take hold of this new life, how do we live in the prophecy of the bones drawn together, clothed with flesh, and in-breathed with new life?

First, we are invited to see the resurrection of Christ as a new creation, a new creation in which we share. It's not only what we say, what we read, how we pray today that helps us to see this. But today, time itself is a kind of sacrament for us. In the Gospel, our Lord speaks to us on the day of the Resurrection,

'THE same day at evening, being the first day of the week'. This is the same day of the first Easter, the day when Christ rose from the dead, and appeared to his disciples.

And in the verses from Scripture which we heard before the Gospel was read, this first day of the week was blended with the eighth day, when our Lord returns.

For the early church, there was a treasure hidden for us in the blending of the first day and the eighth day. The eighth day was not just the first day come round again, any old Sunday. In the Greek description of the day in John 20.1 as the 'one day' at the beginning of the week, *μᾶ των σαββάτων*, the fathers say a clue which invites us all to see this day as a kind of sacrament of time. The eighth day is the first day of the new creation.

One of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church, St Basil the Great, describes the eighth day of Easter, today, this way:

'The Day of the Lord (*hemera Kyriou*) is great and celebrated (Joel II:11). Scripture knows this day without evening, without succession, without end; the Psalmist calls it also the eighth day because it is outside of this time of seven days.'<sup>1</sup>

The eighth day of Easter, today, the octave day is 'the visible symbol, the sacrament' with a special hidden grace. Every Sunday is the eighth day, the first day of Easter when Christ rises from the dead, 'the first day of the week, [the day] on which light was created, [the day on] which the Saviour rose from the dead' ... [the day] which is the sign or figure of the one eternal day in which we live already. Every Sunday is a celebration of this first day and this eighth day.'<sup>2</sup>

For these forty days, the Easter candle is a sign of the gift of the eighth day. The Easter candle is a sign of the light and the presence of Christ: Christ who led the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea by a Pillar of Fire, Christ who freed humanity from of the slavery of sin, is present with his people gathered on the first day of the week. The grains of incense in the cross on the candles are emblems of wounds which He showed the gathered disciples, and which He shows us each time we celebrate these holy mysteries.

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<sup>1</sup> Basil, in Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, 'The Eighth Day', p 266: '>Whether you call it day or age, the sense is the same. If this state is called day, it is one (*mia*) and not multiple; if it is called aeon, it is alone (*monakos*) and not part of a whole (*pollostos*)'

<sup>2</sup> Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, 'The Eighth Day', p 266. Daniélou: 'But the visible symbol, the sacrament, meant to guide our spirits towards this unique aeon, is the first day of the week, that on which light was created, on which the Saviour rose from the dead, of which the Sunday of each week is the liturgical commemoration; it is called one to signify that it is the figure of the oneness of the age to come. The whole theology of the Sunday is now seen clearly; it is the cosmic day of creation, the biblical day of circumcision, the evangelical day of the Resurrection, the Church's day of the Eucharistic celebration, and, finally, the eschatological day of the age to come.'

The Epistle today from 1 John 5 helps us to live in this world of signs. Christ has risen from the dead, and whoever is born of God has overcome the world. This is the gift of Baptism. Baptism is not a mere ceremony of the Church. The Lord Jesus gives us baptism as the gate by which we enter into the new creation. In baptism, we share in the death of Christ, and we are raised from the dead with Christ. We are the ones St John describes in the epistle for today. We recognize the signs, the water, the blood, the gift of the Spirit.

In this Gospel, St John does not just describe the water and the blood which flow from the side of Christ as something which happened when His beautiful and blessed side was opened with the spear. He stops, he bids us consider:

‘And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.’ (John 20.35)

‘This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.’ (1 John 5.6)

The water and the blood speak to us of the sacraments of the Church, the water and the blood are the signs of the death of Christ, but they are also the signs of life, the water is the water of baptism, and the blood is the cup of salvation, the chalice which we are invited to drink this morning. The connection between what St John sees at the cross and the sacraments of the Church is the basis of the wonderful prayer that prays that our Lord would hide us, shelter us, protect us within his wounds.

May the Soul of Christ sanctify me,  
And the Body of Christ save me,  
And the blood of Christ sustain me,  
And the Water from the side of Christ wash me,  
And the passion of Christ comfort me.  
O good Jesu, hear me,  
Within thy wounds hide me,  
Suffer me not to be separated from thee. (The Anima Christi Prayer)

What is the particular gift which is put before our eyes today?

‘Peace be unto you ... And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.’ (John 20.21-23)

That the special gift of the Resurrection is the forgiveness of our sins, our justification, is not obvious to human thinking and reasoning. Our Holy Week journey helped us to see this. We learned to see the slavery of the people of Israel in Egypt as a picture of sin. Sin is a kind of captivity. Sometimes we choose this captivity, and sometimes we are carried away to this captivity. The gift of the resurrection is the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

Sin is ‘hard bondage’. The gift of the peace of Christ is the gift rest from sin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Daniélou, quoting St Augustine: "There is a sacrament of the Sabbath, prescribed by God to the fathers of old, that we Christians observe spiritually by abstaining from all servile work, that is to say, from all sin, and in having rest in our heart, that is to say, spiritual tranquility. But even though we try to do this in this present time, we shall not arrive at this spiritual rest until we go out of this life" ( *Co. Jo. XX, 2; P.L., XXXV, 1556*)

"We shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise."

This peace is the gift of the eighth day, of the new creation, and we are invited to choose it for ourselves, to discover that it is true, and to discover the peace which our Lord breathes on us and in us: we pray to ‘put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth’.

Finally, how do we lay hold on this victory, how do we live in this peace?

‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ (1 John 5.4) Our faith.

‘Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?’ (1 John 5.5): again, belief;

and finally ... ‘He that believes on the Son of God hath the witness in himself’ (1 John 5.10).

Faith is presented to us as the means that we live in this new reality. The new life is the work of Christ, the new life is the gift of baptism, and the new life is the gift of faith.

‘Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life.’<sup>4</sup> This faith is not something which we give ourselves; faith is the gift which the risen Christ wishes to give. He invites us again this morning to look at Him, to recognize Him among us.

The gift of Easter, the victory which overcomes the world, is a gift beyond human creation and human imagining. This victory gives itself to faith because it is a victory which breaks into the natural world of our thinking and reasoning and living.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early on the one day when it was yet dark. We live with her in that darkness which is also light.

Faith is the gift of God which enables us to look to Christ, to know that we share in the victory which overcomes the world. As we look to Christ, as we seek to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, as we seek to live in the light of the eighth day, we will discover that this light and this faith changes us. Our worship, the worship today and every first and eighth day, is so powerful because it turns us to Christ. We look to Christ, and His mind is shaped in us. The faith which grasps and apprehends the gifts of Easter is the work of Christ in us.

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<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *GENERAL AUDIENCE, St. Peter's Square Wednesday, 19 November 2008*

‘I think we should meditate more often — in our daily life, marked by problems and at times by dramatic situations — on the fact that believing in a Christian manner means my trusting abandonment to the profound meaning that sustains me and the world, that meaning that we are unable to give to each other but can only receive as a gift, and that is the foundation on which we can live without fear. And we must be able to proclaim this liberating and reassuring certainty of faith with words and show it by living our life as Christians.’ BENEDICT XVI, *GENERAL AUDIENCE, Saint Peter's Square, Wednesday, 24 October 2012*

From these irrepressible questions it becomes clear how the world of planning, of precise calculation and of experimentation, in a word the knowledge of science, although important for human life is not enough on its own. We do not only need bread, we need love, meaning and hope, a sound foundation, a solid terrain that helps us to live with an authentic meaning even in times of crisis, in darkness, in difficulty, and with our daily problems. Faith gives us precisely this: it is a confident entrustment to a “You”, who is God, who gives me a different certitude, but no less solid than that which comes from precise calculation or from science. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent of the human person to specific truths about God; it is an act with which I entrust myself freely to a God who is Father and who loves me; it is adherence to a “You” who gives me hope and trust.

Of course, this adherence to God is not without content; with it we are aware that God has shown himself to us in Christ, he has made us see his face and has made himself really close to each one of us. Indeed, God has revealed that his love for man, for each one of us, is boundless: on the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God made man, shows us in the clearest possible way how far this love reaches, even to the gift of himself, even to the supreme sacrifice. With the mystery of Christ’s death and Resurrection, God plumbs to the depths of our humanity to bring it back to him, to uplift it to his heights. Faith is believing in this love of God that is never lacking in the face of human wickedness, in the face of evil and death, but is capable of transforming every kind of slavery, giving us the possibility of salvation. Having faith, then, is meeting this “You”, God, who supports me and grants me the promise of an indestructible love that not only aspires to eternity but gives it; it means entrusting myself to God with the attitude of a child, who knows well that all his difficulties, all his problems are understood in the “you” of his mother. And this possibility of salvation through faith is a gift that God offers all men and women. I think we should meditate more often — in our daily life, marked by problems and at times by dramatic situations — on the fact that believing in a Christian manner means my trusting abandonment to the profound meaning that sustains me and the world, that meaning that we are unable to give to each other but can only receive as a gift, and that is the foundation on which we can live without fear. And we must be able to proclaim this liberating and reassuring certainty of faith with words and show it by living our life as Christians.

Once again, we will come to the Holy Communion knowing how much we need these gifts. We come praying that these dry bones can live. We come seeking manna in the wilderness, we come seeking the real presence of our risen Lord.

Today we are invited to know who we are, sons and daughters of God, and live according to the life which has been given to us.

We have been raised with Christ. Let us seek that life which is hidden for us in the gift of the eighth day.