

**Skirmishing With Death**  
**Lent 5, Year A**  
**Ezekiel 37: 12-14, Romans 8: 8-11, John 11: 1-45**  
**10 April 2011**

Lloyd Geering's autobiography offers clues as to why he does not believe in the resurrection of the dead. His first wife died when he was the young parish minister of Opoho in Dunedin. Not long afterwards another family member died, I think his brother. The finality of death struck home to him – he drew the conclusion that when we die we have had our chips.

Early tragic death can have this unhinging effect. A recent film chronicles the intense grief experienced by Charles Darwin when his favourite beloved daughter died as a child. He carried on an imaginary relationship with her for quite some time afterwards. Then he published his revolutionary ideas about evolutionary biology.

Amongst other things it offered the idea that death is the engine that drives the evolutionary process of life on this planet. Operating as the agent of natural selection it culls out those unfit to breed, it encourages adaptation and change in species, it suppresses some species and raises up others, and drives the process of the endless proliferation of types of life on our earth.

So death is big, a giant in fact. There are those who can't hack the God of the Bible who comfort themselves with the thought that we live on in the memories of others. But that lasts about 5 minutes in terms of historical time, and if you were counting on monuments and tombstones to perpetuate your memory then take a look at our Churchyard.

For the prophet Ezekiel the loss of memory issue is even more acute. The bones he is looking at represent the entire people of Israel, and the bones are so far gone that you couldn't pick up a skull and say, "Alas, poor Yorick I knew him well." As Ezekiel prophesies at the command of the Lord the Spirit gives power to his words – first the bones come together – and then in the next sequence of Spirit filled words flesh and sinew come on them.

When Jews read this passage today they say it refers to the return of their people from exile, and the restoration of the Jewish nation. But if that is all it is about then it is a very ambiguous and half fulfilled prophecy. It took decades to put Jerusalem and the Temple back together again. There was a lot of social tension around issues like intermarriage with gentile locals. And it was a fragile recovery that never quite got back to the old glory days. Before long foreign invaders were back in control.

So the prophecy of a kind of return to Eden never happened. What is being talked about here presses forward to a greater delivery point, and a much bigger hope. It represents what I would call an opening skirmish with the giant that death is.

Romans represents another skirmish. All through chapter 7 Paul has been talking about the impossibility of living a good life pleasing to God and on side with him if you are trying to do it in your own efforts because the law of sin and death will drag you down into a self pre-occupied morass. In chapter 8 he goes on to tell the Romans that if you have got the Holy Spirit abiding in you then living an ethical life becomes a possibility. In the middle of all this he tosses in another powerful idea that is almost off at a tangent:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you.

Reading this I am reminded that no one actually saw Jesus being raised from the dead – the gospels record what you might call the after effects. But if we had been privileged witnesses inside the tomb on that fateful Sunday morning what we would have seen would have been the most stupendous act of spiritual power that the Holy Spirit has ever carried out. Death had taken a body blow.

Consider now the Lazarus story. This is in fact an act of resuscitation, not resurrection. Lazarus has certainly been brought back from the dead, but he will die again. That applies to all the people Jesus heals, and the few others he also raises from the dead. Only a temporary victory is achieved over that giant that is death.

We might note too that the power and the grim reality of death is fully taken into account in what we are told. Consider Martha's appalled reaction when Jesus tells the onlookers to roll away the stone. Modern anodyne translations don't do nearly as well as the King James Bible here:

Lord by now he stinketh, it being the fourth day.

And the visible emotion and inner turbulence on Jesus' part just before this act of spiritual power isn't just sympathy with the sisters – he is having to summon up all his spiritual reserves to take on what Paul called, "The last enemy."

And the last enemy gets the last word in this story because some of the onlookers decide that what they have just witnessed means it is time to put in motion the process that will lead to Jesus being terminated with extreme prejudice. Which is the paradox about him summed up well in a Eucharistic prayer I use from time to time:

He healed the sick, though he himself would suffer;  
He offered life to sinners, though death would hunt him down.

We are just two weeks away from Easter when the skirmishing with death stops, and it is all out war as the Son of God and the Holy Spirit take on the grim reaper. I am going to conclude with two quotes. The first is from Hans Urs Von Balthasar's *Mysterium Paschale*:

But the Spirit is not only an instrument of Resurrection. He is also the milieu in which the resurrection takes place...This milieu is not, however, one which Christ enters as an environment strange to him, since he is beforehand, as "second Adam," the "life-giving Spirit;" rises again as, "a spiritual body;" and is wholly identified with the realm of the Spirit ("The Lord is the Spirit," 2 Corinthians 15: 44). Whoever wishes to live in the Lord must live in the Spirit and by him.

The second quote is a well-known poem by John Donne:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou thinkest, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones and souls delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, Chance, kings and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war and sickness dwell,  
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,  
And better than thy stroke; why swellst thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.