

Wanted: Dead and Alive

In the name of him who gives life to the dead, dear friends in Christ: Yes, the Lord giving life to the dead is the main subject of all three of today's Scripture readings. From the Prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament we have the valley of dry bones: a long ago vast army of slain left to rot and desiccate under the hot sun. The Lord leads the prophet around among the scattered bones to impress upon him the enormity of the problem, and then asks him "Son of man, can these bones live?" If anyone but the Lord had asked the question, it would have been laughable. No way. Not in a million years. But Ezekiel knows that it *is* the Lord who's asking. Still, he can't wrap his head around how it might come to pass, so he hedges his bet and answers rather timidly, "Lord God, you know."

That's right. The Lord knows. He then directs the prophet simply to speak his Word to the bones, which he does. And then Ezekiel watches in amazement as the bones reassemble themselves into full skeletons. Then flesh grows on them and skin covers them until at last the fully formed bodies appear as if they had just fainted and fallen down – rather like Adam when the Lord formed him from the dust of the earth but before he breathed life into him. The Lord next directs the prophet to speak to the Spirit so that life and breath enters the bodies. Again, it happens. The vast army rises to its feet ready to do the Lord's bidding. Nothing is too hard for the Lord to accomplish. It takes only his Word.

Strangely enough, while this vision of Ezekiel finds its ultimate fulfillment in the general resurrection on the Last Day, in its immediate context it's about something else entirely. It's a vivid portrait of the Lord's promise to restore the nation of Judah after it had been destroyed and its people taken into exile in Babylon. These exiles are very much alive; but they are complaining that they are dead and that their hope is dried up. They don't believe the promise of God to restore them as a nation. Through the prophet's vision the Lord is saying, "What? You think restoring a dead nation is too hard a thing for me? Just watch what I can do with those who are really dead." Again, it only takes his Word.

As he proves again in the reading from St. John's Gospel in which Jesus raises his friend Lazarus who is dead and has been buried for four days. Everyone there also considers the situation to be too late and beyond hope. "If only Jesus had gotten here in time." Even Martha, who claims that she believes Jesus will raise the dead on the Last Day, can't imagine how he could possibly do it now. She strongly objects when Jesus asks that the tomb be opened. No, she thinks, like everyone else who is dead, Lazarus will just have to wait until the Last Day to live again. Even Jesus can't give life to him in the present. She was wrong. They all were. It's not a problem for Jesus. It's an easy thing for him to give life to the dead now in time. It only takes his Word.

And that's what Paul is saying in today's Epistle reading. Jesus gives life to the dead now in time. Yes, he is going to raise you up on the Last Day; but you don't have to wait until then to live your new life.

Actually, Romans chapter eight from which this text comes is the capstone and conclusion of Paul's meticulous presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that he begins to lay out already in the first chapter, so a brief overview of the whole thing will be helpful. For the first two and a half chapters, Paul shows how all people are born in sin and are entirely corrupted. They are, therefore, under the wrath and condemnation of God. He goes on to show that the

Law of God is a good thing. It describes what kinds of righteous thoughts, words, and actions are pleasing to the Lord. The problem is that those born in sin are spiritually dead and utterly incapable of producing any such thoughts, words, or actions. Quite the contrary, we do exactly the opposite of what God demands of us in his Law. This leads to Paul's stunning revelation that the Lord's primary purpose in giving us his Law is not to try to make us behave better because that can't work; rather his purpose is to show us how thoroughly dead we are in sin so that we will give up on the idea that we might possibly save ourselves by our efforts to keep the Law. The Law is for us, quite literally, a dead end.

Having destroyed any hope we might have in ourselves, Paul then points to the Lord's answer to our problem. He knew we could not save ourselves. So, in love, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to fulfill the righteous demands of the Law for us. He lived the perfect life that was worthy of the Lord's approval on our behalf. He then gave that perfect life as a sacrifice of atonement on the cross. He didn't just live a perfect life for us, he also died for us to pay the penalty that God demands for the sins we committed. He fulfilled the whole Law for us, both its earned blessings and its deserved curses. Thus he achieved for us the righteousness of God.

This righteousness of God is received by faith; not by doing, but by believing in Jesus Christ, who he is, both God and man, and what he did to save us. To anyone who does believe, the Lord imputes Christ's righteousness, and with it all the blessings that go with it: salvation, eternal life, endless joys, and so on.

Having established that righteousness and salvation are God's gifts to us that are received by faith, Paul goes on to show that even the faith that receives God's gifts is itself a gift. People dead in sin can't believe God's Word and promises. By nature they reject them. In order to believe, they have to be made alive. So the Lord does that. He gives life to the dead. How? The same way he did it through Ezekiel. The same way Jesus did it: by speaking his Word. When the good news about Jesus is proclaimed to those dead in sin, the Holy Spirit works through those Words to breathe life into the spiritually dead. It's that living person, that new sinless nature, who believes and thus receives the gifts.

In chapter seven of Romans, which immediately precedes today's reading, Paul describes the believer's dilemma. While still in this life a believer has two natures: the old, sinful, dead, unbelieving nature, and the new, righteous, living, believing nature. The two coexist together – which ought to cause conflict. This is where we hear Paul venting his frustration: "The good that I want to do, I don't do. No, I end up doing the evil that I don't want to do. Because every time I try to do what's good, evil is there within me sinking the effort. Oh, what a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" But then he concludes with this hopeful statement: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" That's his answer to the dilemma: Jesus. The Savior. The one who won the victory for us. The one who gives life to the dead.

The struggle a Christian undergoes, this conflict between the natures, is actually a good thing. If you are experiencing it, it means that you are in Christ Jesus; and if you are in him then you are under no condemnation. The unbeliever, by which I mean a total non-Christian, has no such conflict. He lives according to his sinful nature, it's all he's got, so his mind set on things of the flesh: what's good for me, what feels good to me, what pleases me, and so on – very selfish. The *believer* has his mind set on the things of the Spirit: what pleases the Lord, what's good for my neighbor, how I can grow in faith and godly virtue and the fruits of the Spirit, and so on.

But again, you as a believer are also an unbeliever. Spiritually speaking, you are both dead and alive. And I am assuming that you recognize this conflict within you, this desire to

serve your flesh on one hand and the Spirit on the other. Here's my concern – and I know because I deal with it myself – it's far too easy to put it off, as it were. Because I know I have a sin nature that messes up even my best attempts not to be selfish and do what's good and right, because I'm doomed to fail, I figure, why bother? It will end in sin. And for Christ's sake, God forgives sin, so I'm covered. So why knock myself out? Why even try? But let's ask, which of my two natures would be asking a question like that? You can bet it's not the new, living, believing nature; which means that it must be the old dead unbelieving nature that seeks the things of the flesh and that ends in death. It doesn't believe that my new life is here now. Hopefully you can relate to this. Like Martha in today's Gospel, it's easy to see the new life that the Lord promises us as something we are going to receive in the distant future, on the Last Day, when the Lord raises the dead. And while that's true in its fullest sense, the truth is that Jesus is giving you new life now. He is raising you from sin and death in the present. He is giving you life by his Spirit, which means he is also giving you the mind of the Spirit and the ability to walk by the Spirit.

And he does it, as always, by his Word – his Word that condemns and puts to death the old sinful nature and that gives life to the new. May we therefore remain steadfast in his Word that we may be kept exactly where the Lord wants us: dead to sin and alive in Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!