

Sunday by Sunday, in the course of my thoughts I will often return to the whole idea of life as a journey, a journey towards God, a journey into God. From the moment we are born we are on that journey, a journey in which Christ is our companion along the way. For each of us that journey is different, it is a very personal pilgrimage.

In spiritual terms all of us are at different stages along that journey. Some may feel that we have only just set out, maybe hesitant about where we are at on that journey. Some may be feeling very much at ease in our walk with God. Of course our feelings may be very much affected by our circumstances of life at this particular point in time. For some life may be pretty good at this point in time - our career is going well, our family are well, maybe someone in the family has recently married, maybe there has been a new arrival in the family. Or maybe things are not so well - there is uncertainty at work, maybe there are tensions in the family, anxieties over our own health or the health of one dear to us.

So maybe as I talk of that journey toward God, for some of you that will struck a chord - others I am sure will be saying to yourselves, "That is all very nice - but why can't I feel like that? Why does God seem to be so far off?"

So in my thoughts this morning on this journey of life, I am going to think of distractions along the way, things that make us lose our sense of direction, that undermine our confidence, at times undermine our faith.

I am not going to think of the distractions of pleasure - money, social climbing. Rather I am going to be thinking of those negative feelings that come in on us all from time to time, that are part and parcel of life. I am thinking of fear and with it a feeling of powerlessness, feelings of despair, feeling that nothing, not

even God can help. Then there are those feelings of guilt - I do or don't do something - I can't forgive myself and find it hard to believe that God can either - I've put myself beyond God's love.

Fear, despair, guilt - these are all things that draw us away from God - to be drawn away from God is to die.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning (the valley of dry bones and the raising of Lazarus) begin with situations of death and despair - death not only for those who are physically dead but also for those nearby, those who have loved them - a drift towards spiritual death as their trust in God is stretched. The Ezekiel passage begins with a vision of an aftermath of battle, the bodies left unburied where they fell, all that are left are the bare bones - a situation of total hopelessness, matching the mood of a people in exile who feel they are utterly alone, utterly abandoned by God, complaining, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone: we are cut off." Then in our Gospel reading there are the half trusting, half reproachful words of Martha and Mary. They had sent for Jesus when Lazarus was ill but he had not come. "Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died."

As I say, each of these stories begins with death and despair - but each is transformed by an infusion of new life, new hope - there is a movement from death to resurrection.

This Sunday, the fifth Sunday in Lent, is traditionally known as Passion Sunday, a day on which our thoughts are focussed on the coming suffering and death of Jesus. Then in two weeks time we will be celebrating that great Festival of the Resurrection, Easter Day. There can be no Easter without Calvary; Calvary without Easter would be simply the cruel death of a well

meaning preacher.

A situation of death and despair transformed by a sovereign act of God in raising Jesus from the dead.

It is this idea of God's power to transform situations of despair that I want to keep in mind as I reflect on these negative feelings that we have been thinking about, these distractions on our journey home.

At this point I just want to add two other episodes of God breaking through into situations of despair. The first is the meeting with the risen Jesus with two disciples on the Emmaus Road. The story begins with two dejected disciples walking away from Jerusalem. The risen Jesus, at this point not recognised, comes alongside and listens to their disappointment. Speaking of Jesus crucified, they complain, "We thought that he was the one ....." The risen Jesus leads them through their disappointed hopes to the point where they recognise him in the breaking of the bread. The other one I often think of is the reconciliation of the risen Lord with Peter at the Lakeside as he asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me? ..... Feed my sheep." This is the counterpoint to Peter's lowest point when, in the courtyard of the High Priest's House he denied ever knowing his Lord. As the cock crew that morning he realised his failure and went out and wept bitterly.

Now these negative feelings I have been talking about, the feelings of fear, of powerlessness, of despair, of guilt - these are all part and parcel of our experience of life. For all of us at times experience bereavement, when the bottom seems to fall out of our world; we all know those times when anxiety takes over and life seems out of control, worry over loved ones, ourselves, work, school or whatever; which of us has not known feelings of guilt, regret -

we do or say things, we let people down, let ourselves down

- and God can seem so far away.

At this point could I ask you to visualise a very young child in distress? - maybe after a fall or some fright. Initially it will not notice the comforting arms of a parent - just conscious of its own pain. But the parent is there, embracing the child, soothing the child.

In our situations of pain, we might feel that God is just not there. The stories of Emmaus, of Lazarus, of the valley of dry bones - these all remind me that God does draw close to us at our point of pain. In his apparent absence he is close. In his apparent disinterest he hears and speaks to our pain.

As we continue on our journey home, as we face the various set backs and problems that are part and parcel of that journey we lay hold of the promise God made to Joshua as he prepared to take on the task of leading God's people into the Promised Land. "The Lord himself goes before you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be discouraged; do not be afraid." (Deut 31:8)