

## Sunday 13 May 2007: Sixth Sunday of Easter

**“Do you want to be made well?”**

**Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 5:1-9**

*The Lord said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"*

*When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"*

I spent much of my working life prior to ordination developing computer systems. Make that statement to many people, and it immediately conjures up images of electronic wizardry, impenetrable technological jargon and rooms full of beeping grey boxes with flashing lights. Actually very little, if any, of my life was spent with my hands up the innards of memory cards or hard disks. Much of it involved asking people questions about what they did in their daily work and finding ways of getting them to ask questions about how they might do things differently. I often found myself trying to persuade people that if they had no idea what the real point of their work or business was, then not even the most sophisticated computer system could be of much use to them. The real key to developing the best systems was often not the most advanced technology but finding the right questions. And for me often the most satisfying aspect of systems development was not the all-singing, all-dancing state of the art solution, but the work that went into teasing out what the problem to be solved really was. Often the questions and the discussions they provoked were so much more interesting than the answers!

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Asking the key questions seems to be a characteristic of many Biblical encounters, starting from Genesis with the voice of God who asks the ashamed Adam “where are you?”. Earlier this week at Morning Prayer we had Paul’s own account of his conversion on the road to Damascus - prompted by a question “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” and calling forth another significant question in response “Who are you Lord?”. Just a few weeks ago in our Post-Easter readings, we heard the story of Peter’s encounter with risen Jesus, who three times asked him: “Simon, do you love me?”. In all of those, it seems to me that a simple question penetrates to the very heart of the encounter and peels back the layers to uncover the core of the relationships that lie there.

Reflecting on the passages we’ve heard today, it was the questions that particularly struck me.

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For Ezekiel, one of the great prophets of the exile, that question must have summed all he was hearing and seeing. Read a few chapters before this morning’s passage and you discover that Ezekiel had just heard the news that Jerusalem, the holy city and place of God’s temple, had fallen into the hands of the enemy – news it seems that rendered him temporarily speechless. With all apparently lost, Ezekiel finds himself, actually or metaphorically in a valley of dry bones and is called to face the crucial question of faith. “*Mortal, can these bones live?*” Even at this lowest point, in this wilderness of death and destruction, is it possible for the God of Israel to do a new thing?

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In our Gospel reading today, we heard the story of Jesus' encounter with the paralysed man at the pool with apparently healing properties. On hearing the man's tale of how he had waited so long for his turn in the healing waters, Jesus doesn't offer words of sympathy with his predicament but asks the penetratingly powerful question "Do you want to be made well?"

I have to say that I can't hear that section of John's Gospel and that question without my stomach turning somersaults. "Do you want to be made well?" seems to me one of those questions that defines the life of discipleship, at so many levels.

Earlier this week, we listened to and watched the extraordinary events unfolding in Northern Ireland. As sworn and bitter enemies set aside sectarian divisions stretching back decades, to sit down together in democratic government, I couldn't help thinking how poignant such questions have been for the people and communities that have lived through the long and tortuous process that lay behind those events –

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And even now, as the communities in Northern Ireland learn to live with that new reality, I can't help feeling that the questions "can these bones live?" and "Do you want to be made well?" will still find resonances in many situations.

"Do you want to be made well"? is a question I find myself asking about the whole issue of global warming and climate change. We are increasingly aware of the impact of lifestyle choices both for the present global family and for future generations, but actually making changes ourselves is so much harder than we imagine – "do we want to be made well"?

And when I ask that question "Do you want to be made well?" of my own personal discipleship, it does shake me to the core and force me to face the things that hinder and mar that discipleship – the hurts real and imagined that I know weigh me down and yet which I cling to and find it so hard to let go of -

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And reflecting on those questions, prompted yet another question in me – what are the questions I live my life by? When I look back at the end of the day, what are the questions I ask myself that allow me to penetrate to the heart of my relationship with God and those around. What are the questions I ask myself that challenge me to grow in that life of discipleship day by day? And am I really prepared to live with those questions even when the answers are difficult or uncomfortable or just impossible to find?

Today we find ourselves as a church community in a different place and perhaps taking on a different shape. That prompts all sorts of questions in us. When Ralph and I came here yesterday to do some setting up for today, our main questions seemed to be, "which key fits where?" and "where on earth are the light switches for the café?". We could spend our time

here asking the basic practical questions and lamenting the differences we find, or we could allow ourselves to ponder on what church or community or faith is about when we're in an unfamiliar place? We could ask ourselves what it means to be the community of St Martin-in-the-Fields, a community that after all defines its mission as about being "Questioning, open-minded people" – when we are in a different place with no familiar physical landmarks. We could ask ourselves individually and collectively - what are the questions we live our lives by? And more importantly than coming up with answers, we could learn to live more confidently with the questions themselves.

In a letter to a friend, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke poses just that challenge: to live with the questions, and to avoid the temptation to rush to easy answers:

*I want to beg you... to be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.*

If we can find the grace to live with our questions, the really challenging uncomfortable questions, if we can find the grace to live with those questions now, then perhaps we too, will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

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