

'God brings Dry Bones to life' – SJD (Family Communion) -2/4/17 – Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Introduction – have handful of dried spaghetti. Who likes food? I have something here for you to eat – would you like some? Offer it (take it around congregation if necessary). Yum Yum what does it taste like? Seems to be missing something! What is wrong with it? It is all dry! Needs cooking! Needs something added to it to 'bring it alive' to eat and taste good! Etc.

Need to put it in some boiling water and perhaps a little olive oil, cook it for 6 minutes or so, drain it with some more boiling water and then add a delicious sauce to the top!

Dry Bones story– the dry spaghetti reminds me of the story we heard in the Bible. God took the prophet Ezekiel and showed him a valley full of dry bones. Not only is the valley full of dry and bleached bones, they all seem to be scattered and no longer joined together.¹ The Hebrew suggests that they might result from an army that had been slain in battle, possibly in an ambush as the army wandered into the valley and were attacked from the surrounding high ground. Where there once had been life now all that remained were the dry bones bleached under the hot sun.

Context –Ezekiel received the vision while he and much of the Jewish nation were in exile in Babylon. There seemed no hope for the future. The nation was dead, conquered and exiled; the worship was dead, the temple that had been in Jerusalem was destroyed; the people were as good as dead, they were slaves in a foreign land: - God had left them and they were like dry bones lying dead for all to see!

The situation is far from hopeless – like the dry spaghetti we can do something with it – or rather God can do something because He alone has the power and authority to bring life where none can be seen. People down the ages have taken encouragement from this – that there is no situation too hopeless for God. This may be the picture of a person's life. Where we cannot believe even God can forgive us for something we have done wrong. It can be the picture of a church – a church like St Paul's Hammersmith, a grand Victorian church sitting under the Hammersmith Flyover near where Ros and I used to teach. It was reduced to just 4 or 5 people worshipping there in the 1980s. Yet today it is full to overflowing with several packed services every Sunday and several million pounds spent on restoring the Church building, adding extra staff and facilities for the church and the wider community without any debt. Or again it can be a nation as here with Ezekiel – a nation apparently under God's righteous judgment. For all of these the situation – whatever it seems- is actually far from hopeless

Transforming the situation – The passage speaks of two main stages in the transformation.

In stage 1, Ezekiel is told to **prophesy to the bones** and to command them '**to hear the word of the Lord**'.² This results in only a partial restoration: '*scattered skeletons are transformed into individual corpses, but they are still just as dead.*'³ There is clearly progress but not yet life. So Ezekiel moves to stage 2 where he is told to prophesy to the 'wind' (breath). This time the corpses come to life, stand on their own feet – the miracle is complete and the situation totally transformed. Of course, the Hebrew word for breath or wind also means spirit as in the Holy Spirit –it is he who breaths in the new life.

But what, you might ask, is the significance of the 2 stages. One commentator I read, the one-time Bishop of St Albans, John Taylor says that the distinction is the **direction** of Ezekiel's prophecy⁴ - first to the bones, telling them to hear, and secondly to the spirit invoking his inspiration. Taylor says, '**the first must have seemed to Ezekiel very much like his professional occupation, exhorting lifeless people to listen to God's word. The effect was limited: true something remarkable happened but the hearers were still dead men.**

¹ Ezekiel 37:7

² Ezekiel 37:4

³ John B Taylor (1969) 'Ezekiel' Tyndall Old testament Commentary p. 235. See Ezekiel 37: 7-8

⁴ John B Taylor (op cit) p 235

The second action was tantamount to praying, as Ezekiel besought the Spirit of God to effect the miracle of re-creation'...This time the result was devastating. What preaching by itself failed to achieve, prayer made a reality.⁵

The message is clear if we want to see changes in our lives, our church or our nation. We must speak out the truth, but in such a way that shows both that we care and that through God things can be changed. Then we need to pray for God to act through his Spirit and bring about the transformation necessary. Yesterday in the final Lenten reflection, we looked at Psalm 85. In it we saw how change comes about God drawing to our attention the need to change – here are the dry bones! We then generate a desire to see change (we speak to the bones) but then God enables this to happen through His Spirit.⁶ At the heart of all this lies both a belief in God and in his ability to change situations.

What do you want changed in your life, in the church, in the nation – God can bring this about but strangely he needs our help if only to show a willingness to be servant in the transformation. May it be so. Amen

⁵ Taylor (op cit) p 235.

⁶ See talk and especially thoughts on Psalm 85:4