

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> March

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
(Romans 8:6-11)  
John 11:1-45

At St James

*Show recorder and wonder how it works*

*It needs breath – air – blowing to make it sound as it is supposed to  
Otherwise its just like a dead piece of wood  
Its breath that brings it to life; that makes it sing and dance.*

I daresay that if you were asked to think of something from the book of the prophet Ezekiel the reading we had today from chapter 37 is the passage that would come to mind. It's very visual and dramatic; the picture of bones coming together to form bodies and then coming to life. And it's one of the few passages from Ezekiel that we read in our regular cycle of readings in church.

Ezekiel was a prophet – someone who brought the word of God into the situations around him, someone who sought to teach people the ways of God. He lived in Jerusalem until, along with thousands of other prominent Jews, he was taken into exile to Babylon. Soon after this the city, including the temple, was destroyed. For the Jewish people this defeat, exile and destruction meant they had no future – there was no hope for them. They were as good as dead.

Much of the early part of the book talks about how this exile was a judgement from God because the people had turned away from him, but towards the end of the book Ezekiel begins to offer some hope – hope that God would restore the nation under a new king like David. Our chapter is part of this message of hope.

Ezekiel sees a valley full of bones. The remains of a great army. A bit like the people of Israel in exile – the remains of a great nation. But the bones had no life, and seemingly no hope of life. God asks him the question “can these bones live?” – and the obvious answer would seem to be no, yet even in the hope-less-ness Ezekiel recognises God's authority and the possibilities by saying “O Lord God, you know”

He is told to prophesy – to speak God's word to the bones. And he does. And slowly, with the sound of rattling the bones come together to form skeletons; flesh and skin

cover them and they become bodies. They are beginning to look like people once again. But there is still no life.

He is told to prophesy again. This time not to the bones, but to the breath. And here the important thing to know is that in Hebrew the word for breath is the same as the word spirit - *ruach*.

*Right at the start of the Bible – in almost the very first verse – we are told that the wind – or the Spirit – hovered over the waters. God’s Spirit was waiting for action. And then we read that God created humans from the dust of the earth and breathed life, breathed his Spirit into them. Our very life originates from God’s breath, God’s Spirit.*

Ezekiel is in effect praying here that the breath of God, the Spirit of God, the very life of God comes into these lifeless corpses and causes them to live, to stand and to be an army once more.

Ezekiel speaking God’s word to the bones, to the people in exile – it would seem – can only go so far – it takes the power of God, the Spirit of God to bring life out of death, hope out of despair.

And God makes the message clear to the nation in exile:.

*I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’*

The people will become a nation once more; they will be restored to their land and they will live because God’s Spirit will be within them.

Just as the dry bones needed breath to make them live; so the dry and forlorn people of Israel needed God’s Spirit that they might live.

(end of the first part)

So what can we learn from this strange story of bones and skeletons ?

Surely it tells us that God is in the business of bringing hope from despair, life from death, new possibilities where there seem to be none. For the people in Ezekiel’s day this meant that they weren’t forgotten in exile; that God was aware of their

plight, he recognised their suffering, he could enter into their hopeless situation and breathe new life into them. He could give them a future.

And for us. As we face up to challenges and difficulties of life; as we try to find the best way forward I think we have a choice.

We can either make things look OK. Present a picture to those around us that all is well so that on the surface all seems fine. But we know that this is an illusion. It may look good, but underneath we feel like that bundle of lifeless bones, sometimes hurting, sometimes despairing, sometimes unsure of who we are and what we are here for, sometimes unable to see a way forward. We can slap on some paint on the damp and crumbling plasterwork; we can put up some new wallpaper to cover the cracks. We can make things look good. Neat and tidy. Shiny and new. But deep down the hurts and scars and pain remain undealt with and unaddressed. We can be just like the corpses after Ezekiel had prophesied. On the outside all looking well, but with no life.

Or we can pray to the Spirit to fill us; allow God to breathe his life, his Spirit into us and give us new hope and a new kind of life. Life in its fullness. Life as it was always meant to be. The life that Jesus offers us – the life he talks about in today's gospel reading

The wonderful tale of Lazarus. The story of an amazing miracle, but also the story with an amazing truth at its heart where Jesus says to Martha "I am the resurrection and the life". Words that for me are more significant than the story of one man being brought back to life. Words for us all to hear and take to heart,

When Martha heard those words she was thinking about life after death. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day", but Jesus says that real resurrection, eternal life, life in its fullness begins not when we die but **now**. When we allow Jesus into our lives; when we allow the Spirit – the very breath of God – into our lives. This is the life we were always supposed to live; life with the power, the breath of God.

It won't mean that we never have to face up to challenges; it won't mean life will always be straightforward or easy; it won't mean there will never be times when we feel low or unsure of the future. But it will mean that we'll have the assurance of God's love surrounding us and God's life within us. That we will know that whatever life throws at us, God himself will give us the strength not just to survive but to thrive. That is the work of his Spirit within us. All we have to do is to ask for God to fill us with his Spirit, just as Ezekiel prayed for the Spirit of God to bring life to those bones.