

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 21 March 2010

There are those who read the Bible almost as if it was a fairy story. So when they come to today's passages (Ezekiel 37: 1-10; John 11: 1-4, 17-27, 38-44) what they see is a picture of bones dancing about, slowly at first and then with more vigour, and somehow the bones become fleshed out into living bodies. And then they see this sad picture of Lazarus, dead for several days and deeply mourned by his sisters, somehow coming back to life at the touch of Jesus. Great stories but not much like life as we know it.

There is another way of reading the Bible. It looks at the text in the conviction that it can speak to us and our experience of life; but not just to us, not just to other people. The Bible is about God, Jesus and the Spirit – and us. Through the text God's Word comes to us. And it is in this second way that we approach the two passages that we have heard.

The Israelites are in exile. What that means is that this small tribe of people have been forcibly carried away to another country where they were made to live as very much second-class citizens. Because it went on for so long, they were beaten down by the experience. They lost hope of life ever getting any better. They certainly lost hope of ever being able to get back to their own country. It is in that situation that Ezekiel believes he has a word from God. It concerns bones, but this is not about skeletons. It is about the life force within people, about the umph, the get-up-and-go which has most definitely got up and gone. God is saying that renewal is possible, a new start in their own country is possible, but it needs those dry bones to start believing. People have got to live hopefully, not despairingly. It will be worth it.

There is something of a parallel in the story of Lazarus. His sisters had sunk into despair, not only because he had died, but also because Jesus was so long in coming to give them support and comfort. All they could do was mourn. It seems to me pointless to conjecture whether Lazarus was actually dead, or whether he was in a coma or whatever, the fact is that he came back to life. His lifeless form came back to life again. He was able to be active again, although eventually he died like all humans do. It happens: depressed people recover confidence, sick people regain energy. It happens but it requires faith, hope, trust.

This is the message of the two texts.

It is a message that touches us. It touches us at times of despair, when loneliness, or overwork, or illness, or sadness overwhelms us. And it even touches those of us who are having a good day. Those for whom things are going well at the moment. For most, if not all, of us have dry times, times when we lose our sparkle, when we can't see our way out of the gloom. It happens to Christian people. It happens to churches. Dry bones and a dead

Lazarus are about us. They describe how things sometimes are, and they show how they might be. Faith and vision can make a difference.

Today is Corrymeela Sunday. A day to remember a community in Northern Ireland that has a lot to teach us. There has long been a deep political division in Northern Ireland between Nationalists and Unionists, and it still exists today. But for decades resolution was sought in a campaign of violence. The politicians tried but failed to find a way to resolve the tension, they tried many times without success. And all the while the men of violence used bombs, bullets and extortion to try to get their way. Although it did not affect everybody, for some life was well nigh intolerable. I can remember once sitting in a church hall in County Tyrone listening to three widows, one after the other, telling the story of how their husbands had been shot. They wanted the visitors from England to know what life was like for them. For that community there was little to look forward to, little to hope for. The bones were dry. The body lacked life.

Yet all through that time there were those like the Corrymeela Community who believed that peace was possible, and who worked in difficult places to bring hope and reconciliation. Those in that Community, and many others who shared their vision, were inspired by the spirit of Jesus, the prince of peace. We know now that the political division remains, the peace is fragile, but at least there is flesh on those dry bones. People have been able to get up and lead a more normal life. So we give thanks for Corrymeela and all who share its spirit of reconciliation.

Let's choose another example, and make it a very unlikely one. Church finance. Can you imagine that finance is a way to make dry bones live? Well, think of this. In the United Reformed Church a great deal of the money is held by the synods. The simple reason for this is that in recent decades a good number of church buildings have been sold and the proceeds have come to the synods. It's happened all over the country but because land values differ so much, the coffers of the synods in the south of England are immensely fuller than those in the north and in Scotland and Wales. As a result of this our synod, for example, has been able to start all sorts of initiatives and to support local churches with new projects. I expect you have benefited from that.

But it's a totally different story if you venture north and west. And so it would have remained if it were not for a programme of resource sharing between the synods which has been going on for a decade or so. Synod treasurers are not usually regarded as the most exciting of people. (I can say that, having been one for two years!) But each year they sit down together and they work out how some of the resources of the rich synods can be shared with the poorest. Not by somebody imposing a tax but by means of Christian generosity and Christian gratitude. The effect of that in places like Scotland and Wales has been dramatic. Dry bones have literally come to life.

And in the same way, even though it is slightly more complicated, the money your church gives to the Mission and Ministry Fund each year, I suspect a pretty significant sum, is the means for some churches elsewhere in the country having a minister, or some communities having a community worker, which would otherwise be beyond their reach. Life is breathed into churches and communities as a result of your giving. I can recall the change that began to happen in the inner city community of Nechells in Birmingham when the new Church Related Community Worker began to set up groups, mostly of women, in which people found ways to help each other out of the trough that their environment had created. The women discovered strength and confidence that they did not know they had. Your giving enabled that sort of thing. Hope being born in a hopeless situation.

Getting dry bones moving or bringing inert bodies to life is not a matter of waiting for a miracle. Yes, it needs God's blessing and power, but it also needs commitment, hope, enthusiasm, vision, insight, sympathy, a passion for justice, trust, patience, cooperation, generosity – all things within our power to give, but all in their different ways having a cost. The responsibility is ours: so runs the text for the stewardship campaign that is your current concern. It's a text for the Christian life, for the mission of the church. We are called by Christ to share responsibility, with others, for the bomb site that is Gaza City, the earthquake-devastated communities of Haiti, the misery of Kingston-on-Thames on a Saturday night, the valiant efforts of tiny chapels in areas of social need, the many charities struggling for funds in a credit crunch, as well as for this community of faith. It's a big calling, but it is a challenge rather than a burden because it is God's mission and it has fullness of life as its goal.

Dry bones and inert bodies brought to life. That is the vision of the Kingdom of God, here in the dust and joy of Kingston life.

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