

Dem bones (Ezekiel 37.1-14)

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Over the past few weeks, we've been reflecting on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the early church. Our readings, all from the book of Acts, have recounted how God's Spirit transformed the vision and animated the witness of these first Christians. There was something new about this outpouring of Spirit but that doesn't mean she was absent in earlier times. The book of Genesis (1.1), speaks of the Spirit 'sweeping over the face of the waters' in primordial times, and in the books of the prophets, there are numerous references to the Spirit granting dreams and visions.

Today's reading is a case in point. This vision, Ezekiel claims, is inspired by the Spirit. He writes: *'The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out **by the Spirit** and set me down in the middle of a valley.'* Now, for some reason, I felt drawn to preach on this passage today. I'm not sure why, perhaps it too is a prompting of the Spirit?? Anyway... *'The hand of the Lord came upon me, and brought me out by the Spirit, and set me down in a valley full of bones'*, says Ezekiel. *'He led me around them; there were very many and they were very dry.'*

Bones. A pile of dry bones; picked clean by vultures, scorched dry by the sun. Bones, bones and more bones. Heaps of them, and bones signify death.

By way of background, Ezekiel, like the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, is concerned most directly with the crisis of 587BC, when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem. When its walls were finally breached the streets ran with blood. The Babylonians carted off the best and brightest of the traumatized survivors, royals, nobles, and priests, and left the rest to scratch out a living amidst the shattered pieces. With too many corpses to bury—

and no priests to provide funeral rites—the people threw the bodies of the dead into the nearby Valley of Ben Hinnom. Eventually, only bones were left. Was this what Ezekiel could see? Whatever, it's a desolate scene. And with it comes a question: *'Mortal, can these bones live?'*

Well, what would you say? On the surface, it's a ridiculous question. I mean, they're not even corpses, they're bones - old dry bones! Can these bones live? No! That's what I'd have said if I were honest. We don't know Ezekiel was thinking; what he said was, *'O Lord GOD, you know.'* It sounds a bit pious to me, but maybe I'm being harsh. Perhaps, Ezekiel realised that what God was really asking was, *'Is there a future for my people, for the nation to live again?'*

As it turns out, God isn't concerned with the answer. Instead, Ezekiel is given two instructions. First: speak to the bones, call them to attention. Tell them to *'hear the word of the Lord'*. Tell them: I, God, *'will cause breath (spirit) to enter you, and you shall live. I'll lay sinews on you, and I'll cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin... and you shall know that I am the Lord.'*

If God's question had seemed strange, this command is even stranger – prophecy to *the bones*?? Why? They're bones. What difference will it make, God's word, in this barren situation? Well, that might be our thought, but it's not God's. *'Mortal, prophecy to the bones'*.

And in response, in his imagination, Ezekiel does. And then, in the corner of his eye ... a tremor ... a rattle ... a clink here ... a clatter there there, and then *WHOSHKA* – bones flying; clanging, clicking, connecting: feet to shins, shins to thighs, to hips, to spines, to skulls ... And then sinew, tendon, muscle, skin, hair; HUMANS! Well, almost, *'but there was no breath in them'*, says Ezekiel – no spirit.

And then, a second command. 'Prophecy to the Spirit (to the wind, the breath)'. Call upon the Spirit, say: 'Come from the four corners of the earth and breathe upon these slain, that they may live'. And, says Ezekiel, 'I prophesied as commanded, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.' Wow! What a vision! It's wild. And Ezekiel had a few of these!! But what does it all mean?

In one sense, an explanation is given in the next few verses. 'Mortal, these bones are the house of Israel'.

They say (i) Our bones are dried up,
(ii) our hope is lost;
(iii) we are cut off completely.

I say (i) I'm going to open your graves,
(ii) bring you up from your graves,
(iii) bring you back to the land.

It's a stylised and compelling piece of prophetic explanation – Israel's threefold experience of woe is met by God's threefold promise of redemption. And (if that's not enough) the promise is repeated, this time in doublets.

God says,

(i) I will put my spirit within you
(ii) and you shall live,

(i) I will place you on your own soil
(ii) and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and acted.

Imagine what this vision must have meant to the exiles in Babylon. Their country lay decimated and kinsfolk lay dead. They'd been dragged off,

humiliated, and enslaved again, like their ancestors in Egypt. Life as they knew it had been destroyed, and their faith shattered. A pile of dry bones ... THE END. That's what it looked and felt like. Death. A totally unpromising situation. Save for one thing ... GOD.

Mortal, can these bones live?

O Lord God, you know.

And God says, *'Hear the word of the Lord'*.

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Friends, *this* is 'the word of the Lord', repeated throughout the scriptures: With God; in the story of God; when the Spirit of God is present, death is *not* the end. Life is. God says, *'I will put my Spirit in you and you shall live.'* It happened for Israel, it happened for the disciples, and it will happen for us. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is life.

This is not to say that hardship and death are bypassed. In God's story, nothing is avoided. I don't think we can draw from this vision that God's people will never struggle or die - that we can delete 'the cross', as it were. This isn't a 'get out of jail fee' card, for individuals or for the community of the faithful. We will die; long established traditions and forms of life do cease to be. There's no blanket guarantee of 'onwards and upwards' - markets crash, empires fall, churches close. Seasons come and go, and we mourn the passing. The message here is not that God will prevent death - death is everywhere present. It's a valley of dry bones. No, the message, the promise of this vision is that death is not the end of the story - it's *'Friday'* here, but (Ezekiel sees) *Sunday's a-comin'!*

In the action of God, death is not, is never the **final** word - the end of the road. *'I will put my spirit within you and you shall live'*. That's the promise. OR as the old spiritual puts it: *Dem bones a-gonna rise again!!*

This renewal, this rising up, is entirely the initiative and action of God. Jesus was raised by God, and as we've seen in Acts, the outpouring of the Spirit is the gift of God. All we can do is trust and receive it – **hear** the word of the Lord. And, in the strength of the Spirit, respond.

'O mortal, prophesy to these bones', tell them to 'hear the word of the Lord'. And, what is the word of the Lord? Well, let's finish with the song:

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Now hear the word of the Lord.

The foot bone 's connected to the ankle bone.

The ankle bone 's connected to the shin bone.

The shin bone 's connected to the thigh bone.

Now hear the word of the Lord!

The thigh bone 's connected to the hip bone.

The hip bone 's connected to the back bone.

The back bone 's connected to the neck bone.

Now hear the word of the Lord.

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones a- gonna rise again.

Now hear the word of the Lord. (x3)