

## **EZEKIEL'S DRY BONES**

It's a joy to be standing here on the Sunday closest to it being 25 years since I was ordained as a priest.

My mother campaigned all her life for the Church of England to ordain women as priests. To her joy this happened before she died, aged 102, and she was present in Southwark Cathedral when I was one of those women to be ordained, in the first nationwide wave. Today, I pay tribute to her, and to the hundreds of other courageous, indefatigable men and women who worked and prayed for a cultural shift in the Church of England, that would permit women to be priests, Archdeacons and later Bishops. My story is in the church magazine, and on the church website, in the April and May issues of 'The Key'.

Now to something totally different. Have you ever stood gazing at a valley thick with human bones?

The closest I got to this was about 40 years ago, when we were missionary doctors in Thailand. Part of Thailand's north-eastern border runs along Cambodia's. Cambodia's terrible genocide was at its height. Incredibly brave refugees fled from massacre in Cambodia's so-called 'killing fields', and then risked death from hidden minefields along the border.

Very occasionally, I escaped from my routine hospital work and spent weekends in an emergency refugee camp close to the border. I was seconded to a brilliant Israeli army, medical team. Diagnosing the local deadly diseases was second nature to me and, within seconds of my diagnoses, *they* would administer life-saving drips and injections for diseases like Cerebral Malaria, Haemorrhagic fever, and Typhoid fever.

It seems that Ezekiel, in today's Old Testament reading, was gazing at a vaguely similar disaster area.

It was terrifying. Clues point to this being a deserted battlefield, covered with bones from hundreds of unburied bodies – all stripped clean by carrion birds. Imagine his horror... What was this? Why had God brought him there?

Ezekiel's job as a prophet was to warn God's people that they had messed-up possibly to the point of no return. They had gone to the extreme of abandoning worshiping their God.

Against the odds, Ezekiel was supposed to make them realise their stupidity, to turn around, to ask for God's forgiveness and wholeheartedly to return to God. In the face of the grim sight of all those bones, he might well have despaired and given up. He felt an abysmal failure as a prophet. It was hopeless.

Unexpectedly, God's voice breaks into his reverie, 'Mortal can these bones live?' Ezekiel fudges his reply, 'Well God, no one knows the answer except you.'

While he's speaking something totally amazing happens. There's a great rattling and creaking, as individual bones discover where they fit, in their correct places, in all those different bodies. Within minutes, the place is full of standing skeletons.

Ezekiel then prophesies a second time and the bones are covered with muscles, tendons, filled with organs and covered with skin. They look like waxworks - standing lifeless, decorating the valley.

At Ezekiel's third prophesy breath enters the lifeless corpses and they breath and live, filling a football stadium or so. Now they're alive! How can we grasp this?

Garvin's going to play you something – don't worry too much about the words. Notice what the *music* does to you?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LJGcscDMaY>

I want to dance, to sing along, and to tap my hands in rhythm to the beat. It's full of life!

There they were – God's chosen people, who'd survived the exile, but couldn't be bothered with worshipping the God who had cared for them so well. The result? In their words, they say, 'Our *bones* are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are clean cut off'.

In their despair they feared that it's 'tit-for-tat'. Because they've abandoned God, then God in turn has deserted them. But, Ezekiel offers them a startlingly simple metaphor of God's loving presence with them. He points out the availability of *breath* – the life-giving force from God. The word '*ruach*' occurs nine times in 14 verses. God is as close to them as their own breath.

Humour me for a moment and try breathing in and out 3 times –1, 2, 3. That's how close God was to them and is to us!

Ezekiel is now really getting hold of the idea of God's grace – '*grace*' which has been defined as 'God's love in action, towards people who merited the opposite of love'.

Just think about it! *God initiated* the whole human enterprise. God made people from dust and breathed life into us. *God then initiated* the whole Israelite project settling them in a good land – despite - let's be honest about this – despite their minimal cooperation. 'Hang on!' Ezekiel is excited now, 'God's about to take the

initiative yet again - God's spirit is going to breath new life into people who are as dead as stone - as dead as bones'.

The reference to 'bones' is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest self or, in the case of '*our* bones,' it's a way for the community to refer to its most essential self. So, when Adam finally finds his partner, Eve, he cries with joy, 'This at last is bone of my bones' - my 'soul mate'.

Earlier in Ezekiel chapter 11, then later in Ezekiel 36, the prophet speaks God's word, promising the exiles, 'I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.'

It's impossible for us to obtain a new heart like this by ourselves. But God's spirit is there, as close as breath, enabling each one of us to live again.

There are times when some of us look at the church here in the UK, and throughout the world, and we despair.

1. The findings of the current child abuse investigation in Chichester diocese, and in the Anglican Church, shames us. And there's more to follow in the coming months.
2. Our apathy and failure to take information about our environment's vulnerability, and dramatic climate rise seriously is disturbing.
3. Our failure to grapple with issues relating to sexuality and gender in the modern world sometimes makes us, as a church, appear irrelevant and unloving to those outside.
4. Our momentary, passing sadness, when it comes to others being homeless is disturbing. Rough sleeper, Peter, dies in Bromley High Street, from alcoholism and diabetes. We feel a bit sad, possibly make an online donation, and then leave it to Ed Tree and his team to take care of such situations.
5. And so the list goes on – you can add your own concerns to it.

Does God see us as a church building full of nice, clean but dead bones, or as a vibrant group of people filled with God's Spirit, awake and available to do God's will – as interested in what happens outside the church building as with what goes on inside.

I wonder whether, to some non-churchgoers, we seem like people who, on the one hand generously welcome them to come inside for food and friendship, but on the other hand, we seem to want *them* to adapt to fit into *our* church culture and *our* way of doing things. Perhaps, God is calling us to spend more time and energy on those who on the outside, adapting ourselves to their way of doing things.

If we're honest, like those Israelites, do we sometimes despair and feel hopeless?

Ezekiel's vision seems uniquely tangible and oddly earthy. God doesn't just put those bones together again but recreates them as messy, complex human bodies - with messy complex human beings (just like us) inside them.

God doesn't command Ezekiel to resurrect only the heroes - those who had been brave in battle or who had sacrificed themselves to save someone else - *all* the bones come back to life. You and I are never 'lost causes' in God's economy.

I believe that God wants to fill and re-clothe the dry bones of some of our church life, to knit us together again by his Holy Spirit and to sweep us up so that we dance into new life.

But God will not do this unless we allow it.

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St Peter and St Pauls church, Bromley, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019*