

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Today's story is an interesting one. It's not a description of actual events but a vision Ezekiel sees. He sees a multitude of bones scattered in a valley. This is reminiscent of a battlefield where the vanquished have been left unburied, where their bodies have been picked on by vultures and now only bones are left. The bones are very dry. There's no life in them. They have been there for a good while. There's nothing left, no hope, no life, the bodies with their life stories are firmly in the past.

It must be a ghastly sight for Ezekiel. God leads him back and forth between the bones and then asks simply: 'Can these bones live?' Ezekiel, feeling this might be a trick question, evades answering it directly. Very much like Jesus will in the future, Ezekiel does not give a straight answer. Instead he says: 'You know.'

Ezekiel does have faith in God but he also knows that God is unpredictable. Very much what we said last week – you never know which way the wind will blow and how a situation is going to turn out. You cannot assume that 'God always' or 'God never'. There are no rules or set patterns here. And yes, God can act in powerful ways but he might not choose to for reasons of his own.

The background to this vision is important and will shed light on its meaning. It takes place after the Israelites are exiled to Babylon. Ezekiel is one of them. Their situation feels hopeless. Jerusalem is destroyed; they're far from home with no hope of ever going back. The nation is in despair and scattered. They feel dead inside and dead as a nation.

The people of Israel believed themselves cut off from God. The temple in Jerusalem was where they believed God resided, therefore if they were far from it, they were far from God. Whether they understood it to mean that he couldn't or didn't want to reach them is immaterial – he was far away and there was nothing they could do about it.

What God does is beautiful and touching to the core. He doesn't deny their feelings or rebuke them for their lack of faith in him; on the contrary he affirms them as he says: 'My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them.' Yes, you are in your graves, you are dead. It's the equivalent of today's: 'It's ok to feel this way!' It's affirmation of how somebody's feeling rather than trying to convince them they're mad to feel this way.

In this vision God signals though that they are wrong. God is in the valley with them. He walks among them. However lonely and isolated they feel they are, God is always there, they just didn't know it.

This applies powerfully to our own personal situations where we feel lonely and despairing. It applies also to the life of the Church. We maybe don't feel dead yet but dying – certainly. We feel there is no hope. We simply wonder – who's going to be the last one to switch the lights off?

The Church as we knew it is gone. What does it mean for God then to say: ‘My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them’? Where is the promise? When God’s Spirit, God’s ruach, comes, when God breathes on his people, there will be a new life. It won’t be the way we knew it but completely different. I said it many times and I’ll keep repeating it – we need to look around to see where God is at work and realign ourselves with it. Be part of this new transformed life of the community of God’s people. God’s breath does not promise restoration of every structure we knew before but it’s a far deeper and more meaningful promise of transforming the world into what God wants it to be, the way a cocoon is changed into a butterfly.

Margaret Odell put it this way in her commentary on this passage: ‘Resurrection is not new life, the perfect promise of a newborn baby, but renewed life, life forged from death; even the risen Jesus still bore his scars.’¹

Quinn Caldwell in yesterday’s Daily Devotional from the United Church of Christ wrote about the vision in Isaiah about the lion and the lamb living together. He points out: ‘Someday, somehow, the lion will start eating straw. The wolves won’t hunt the lambs, and the bears will eat grass. Which is to say, the predators will stop being predatory. (...) For most of them it would require a complete change in anatomy. God who gives food to the hungry will also have to give an extra stomach or two to the non-ungulates if they’re going to start eating grass. It’ll need to be a near-total makeover for the predators.’²

Hardly anybody likes change. It’s just the way we’re wired. We long for the way things were in the past. Couldn’t we just turn back the clock? God recognizes this nostalgia, this longing in us and yet he made the world in such a way that we cannot go back. For our own good. For his own purposes.

The vision in today’s passage points to the choice we all face. Verse 10 reads: ‘I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.’ God did the work but it was up to them to stand up and form the army. It is up to us to respond to God’s grace, healing and transformation. For this to happen we need to let go of the past and open ourselves to the experience of the new that God brings us into.

A fellow minister on the Path of Renewal, Rev Neil Meyer from Kintore, came up with the following metaphor which I’d like to close with.

‘Imagine an episode of Strictly Come Dancing. The contestants have spent the first three weeks dancing the waltz. They know how to waltz, and they waltz well.

But this week the music changes. Suddenly, it is a tango rhythm, and none of the contestants has ever danced (or even seen or heard!) a tango before. To make matters worse, none of the instructors has ever heard, seen or danced a tango before either. What to do?

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2070.

² Quinn Caldwell, Predator, UCC Daily Devotional, 9th December 2017.

Some of the dancers decide that since they know how to waltz, they will carry on waltzing - regardless of the music. (They will, of course, be voted out at the end of the round.)

Most of the dancers, sensing that the rhythm is different, intuitively begin to move as best they can to the new beat. Eventually they will figure out how to dance to this new music even if, for a while, they look a little bit silly and awkward.

The really smart dancers decide to take a step back, to listen carefully to the music and to work out a new set of steps for this dance.

(Can you see where this is going?)

In the Church we have been dancing the same waltz for 300, 500 or 1500 years (depending on whether you take the Enlightenment, Reformation or Constantine as your starting point). In any event, we know the waltz pretty well by now and we do it well.

But the music has changed, and if we are to survive we will have to learn how to dance to this new beat.

2 Points are helpful:

1) The change of music was not made by the minister. Neither was it a decision of the Kirk Session, or a new policy instituted by 121.

It is the world in which we live that has brought about the changes that all churches, everywhere are now facing.

2) Some churches will carry on waltzing (doing things the way they've always been done), and that may appeal (for a while) to the ageing members of their congregations until they all die out.

Most churches are sensing that things have changed and are intuitively beginning to move to the new rhythms, although for a while they may seem clumsy and awkward.'

Can you hear the music? Shall we dance? Amen.