

Sermon notes - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent - March 29, 2020

Choices when all seems lost

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-43

The nation of Israel had been reduced to two of the twelve tribes named for the descendants of Jacob. After years of living in the Promised Land enemy nations had taken into captivity or inter-married with the 10 northern tribes. Only Judah and Benjamin remained along with the priests who had remained faithful. Finally even this remnant had been taken into captivity by the king of Babylon and his armies. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion" wrote someone from that nation in captivity (Psalm 137) It was sometime during this captivity that King Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies back to Jerusalem to finish the job. They destroyed the city walls, pulled down the Temple, and carted off all the treasures. The news of that event made sad people even sadder. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" One of the young men who had been taken into captivity was a priest named Ezekiel who was likely very upset at the news of the beautiful Temple which had been built by King Solomon lying in ruins. Before this had happened Ezekiel had been singled out to be a prophet to the people of Israel. Through a powerful vision and the gift of a message Ezekiel was sent to spread God's message to the people held in captivity. The record of his ministry is filled with provocative and compelling images and messages of hope and challenge. The portion of the message contained in today's set of readings is among the most well known of Ezekiel's messages. Who hasn't sung the song "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones ..." The message begins with a question from God to his prophet as the vision of dry bones was displayed before him. "Mortal, can these bones live?" The answer from a human point of view is, of course, no. How can bones bleached dry in the sun be brought to life? Ezekiel probably had the same thought but he had also been watching God at work for some time and so his answer was 'O Lord God, you know'. And then he was given the instruction to prophesy to the bones - to give them the following message. "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:vv 4-6) The same God who spoke 'let there be light' and there was light was instructing his prophet to speak these words of life into an equally hopeless case. There was a darkness and a void at the beginning and there were dry bones in this case.

While we are not in the least in the same predicament as Ezekiel and his fellow Jews we are in the midst of some things that may seem monumentally difficult. Whether it is the obvious Covid-19 crisis or something else very few people have escaped events that seem overwhelming. "Can these bones live?" can become a metaphor for the barriers and situations in which we sometimes find ourselves. Our answer, like Ezekiel's answer is: "O Lord, you know". The story of the dry bones was to be for the descendants of Abraham a message of hope that all is not lost. Even though they have been reduced to dry bones as a nation God is able to restore their lives - to breath life into the dry bones. Our current crisis brings fear and uncertainty - just check the stock market report if you don't believe me - and it can feel that all hope is lost. I have heard statements wondering if we will ever recover from the effects of this pandemic. "Will these dry bones live?" Let us listen further to the dialogue between God and Ezekiel

"Then God said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. The say, 'our

hope is lost, we are cut off completely'. Therefore prophecy, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: 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....' (vv. 11-13) It would seem that God wanted the people of Israel to be encouraged that their current fate wasn't the entire story. Their mood was understandable given the conditions under which they were living but their assessment that "our hope is lost, we are cut off completely" did not take into consideration the fact that they were still in a covenant relationship with the Creator of the world. While God's promises did not change their situation immediately the hope it was intended to generate was a real and tangible thing. The dry bones of the exiled people of Israel was not the entire story and they were restored to their land and their destiny. In this action the people were once again shown that God was faithful to his covenant with them and would accomplish all that he set out to do.

And if we need more evidence that God is able and willing to accomplish all that he has set out to do we need only regard the story of Lazarus. Again we see an impossible situation - a man who had been dead for 4 days. The family of the deceased are feeling that their hope is lost and that they are cut off completely. Anyone who has experienced the grief following the death of a loved one knows something of this devastation. In a demonstration of the ability of the Creator of the world to bring life from death Jesus speaks to the dead man and, as in Ezekiel's vision, God brings about the restoration in the face of that hopelessness.

So what about our situations. Even apart from living in a Covid-19 world I suspect there are times when we have all felt like a valley of dry bones. "Our hope is lost, we are cut off" are words that might have slipped from our lips or at least the sentiment behind them might have been in our minds. As people who have been adopted into Covenant family through our Baptism and our faith in Jesus we are also assured that 'these dry bones can live again'. The reality of God in our lives is sometimes forgotten or taken for granted but God is in our lives and God will accomplish all that he has set out to do. He does, however, ask for our cooperation. The dry bones did not just re-animate on their own. Ezekiel, as co-creator in this situation, was asked to speak God's message to the dry bones. This isn't a case of wish fulfilment or positive thinking since the message Ezekiel delivered didn't come from him. After spending time in God's presence through prayer Ezekiel was given the message to proclaim that had the result described in the vision. So, what are the dry bones in our own lives? Which situations prompt us to say, 'our hope is lost, we are cut off completely'? Do the words of Ezekiel speak into those situations in a way that is meaningful to us? Are we being asked to speak into the situation in our lives, or in someone else's life, with a message of hope that originates with our Lord God? I believe that we are all agents of the Creator who spoke through Ezekiel into the valley of dry bones, who spoke through the Messiah into Lazarus' tomb, and who speak through each of us. As we make the telephone calls and reach out in other ways to one another in this time I pray that we will all be aware that we are not just staying in touch but that we may be speaking life into a valley of dry bones.

*O Loving Father, we commend to your gracious keeping all who are near and dear to us. Have mercy on any who are sick, and comfort those who are in pain, anxiety, or sorrow. Awaken all who are careless about eternal things. Bless those who are young and in health, that they may give the days of their strength unto you. Comfort the aged and infirm, that your peace may rest upon them. Hallow the ties of kindred, that we may help, and not hinder, one another in all such good works as you have prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*