

SERMON 9.3.08

The Spirit brings life!

Bible Reading: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Impossible situations!
Hopeless circumstances!
Pointless questions!

Sobbing and wailing filled the air on Friday in Jerusalem as thousands of people gathered for funerals of eight teenagers, 15 or 16 years old, killed by a Palestinian gunman at a religious school on Thursday. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' one of the school's rabbis quoted from Psalm 22, the same words uttered by Jesus from the cross as he hung dying.

Can there ever be peace in the Middle East?

Victoria is in the grip of a housing crisis where the possibility of owning one's home is fast receding from the dreams of many lower-income and even some middle-income families. Rental properties are scarce. House prices and rental costs have risen to the point where even if people do have secure accommodation, the cost of living, services, petrol and transport are such that every week is an effort to live within a budget.

This problem is prevalent in Hobsons Bay. Jenny Peace, the Williamstown Emergency Relief crisis intervention welfare worker, said recently that 950 local families are struggling to find somewhere to live or something to eat. That's the number of families on the ER books, compared with 504 families in the previous year, 2006/7. (*Hobsons Bay Leader* 19.2.08)

Can there ever be a time when there will be adequate, affordable housing for everyone in Australia?

Thousands of bones have been strewn across many nations of the world from atrocities committed in Rwanda, Kenya, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, concentration camps in Europe, and the killing fields in Cambodia. The millions of people represented by all these bones cannot come back to life.

Can there ever be a time when oppression and injustice cease?

A valley in Israel – dry, sun-bleached, desert-like – filled with the dried-up bones of thousands of soldiers killed in defending their nation when they were invaded by the powerful empire of Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was gone. Those who were not killed were taken captive and carted away to Babylon in exile, away from their homeland, the place they loved. All this happened about 590 years before Christ. It is likely that the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel's vision was something that he had actually seen that stayed vividly in his mind.

Can these bones live?

That's not a question that we ever ask about a dead body. But it's a question that God asked Ezekiel about the multitude of bones. God has a way of using impossible situations and doubtful questions to teach us something about faith, about who He is, and about His capacity to always be doing a new thing.

'Dry bones' times are inevitable

Remember that 'dry bones' times are inevitable. They are unavoidable in our lives, and they are also bound to happen in the life of the church. What happens when you cook a chicken or a roast leg of lamb? What do you do with the bones? They are discarded. You might give the lamb bone to the dog – but even the dog might bury it. Listen to this description of a 'dry bones' time: 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there's nothing left of us, we are cut off.' (*Ezekiel 37: 11*) This was the cry of the people in exile in Babylon, far from their homeland in Israel. Ezekiel heard this cry repeatedly, and it is echoed in the vision of the valley of dry bones. Bleached by the hot sun. Dead. No sign of life. The people wondering if they would ever walk on their native soil ever again.

When have you experienced 'dry bones' times? It may even be now. What has caused you to be in such a valley? Perhaps you are burnt out by soulless work. Maybe circumstances in your family life or extended family are not turning out as you expected. Possibly you are wounded from a broken relationship. Or in the grip of habits that are not healthy or life-giving. Or we have ignored God and gone our own way for a while and wonder why feel lost. When we look at our community, there are factors that contribute to people going through tough times: mortgage stress, unaffordable housing, chronic ill health, gambling debts ... the list goes on.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the church can experience 'dry bones' times? Despite the efforts that are made to connect with people, to be engaged in mission projects that seem to be the way to go, to present God's Word faithfully, there can be little sign of growth? What happens when a church experiences such a time? I don't believe that this is a 'dry bones' time for the church, because there are new things happening and new people being brought into association with the church, even if that is happening slowly. But you need to be prepared for such times. If it does happen, you continue to be faithful in prayer, in worship, in giving, in serving – and let God do the rebuilding and the re-energising. It's hard, because usually people leave a church in such times, going searching for something better or more exciting. Sometimes the church needs to go through a pruning time, when every ministry activity of the church is assessed according to the aim of helping people know about God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Priorities have to be set in order again, so that Jesus takes his rightful place as head of his Church.

God's promise to us comes in 'dry bones' times

God doesn't wait for us to be in a good place before He reaches into our circumstances to give us hope. Ezekiel, in his vision, was in the middle of the valley, surrounded by dry bones, when God gave him the prophecy or promise that Ezekiel was to give to the dry bones. Speaking to dead people? Saying words that seemed impossible to fulfil? That's what God asked him to do. And do you know what? Twice the Bible says that Ezekiel prophesied **as he had been commanded.** (*Ezekiel*

37: 37: 7; 10) Therein lies the secret of co-operating with God's action to bring us through the 'dry bones' times.

What was God's promise that would be fulfilled beyond the present time? 'I'll breathe my life into you and you shall live, and you will know that I am God. I'll put my Spirit in you.' (*Ezekiel 37: 5-6, 14*) When was the promise activated? As Ezekiel did what God commanded him to do. This required him to **listen** to the Lord.

It is so easy and natural, according to our human instincts, to blame God or everyone else when we are in a tough place, a 'dry bones' time. We have to learn to listen to God – through His Word, through the still, small voice within each one of us, or through the counsel of a wise person, who could be a friend or a mature Christian. I believe that we all go through these times. They are not necessarily a sign that we are not being faithful in our walk with Jesus. However, sometimes they can be. Hold on to the promise that God gives you. Hold on to the fact that He is with you and with His Church in the tough times. Remember that the Spirit of God set Ezekiel down in the middle of the valley of dry bones, and there His presence was with him, **and He spoke to him**. He didn't desert him. Remember the words of the Psalm: 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, or the valley of the shadow of death, or the valley of dry bones, I fear no evil; for you are with me.' (*Psalm 23: 4*)

There will be restoration and renewal in the 'dry bones' times

Do you know what happened with Ezekiel's prophecy? The Jews eventually did go home from Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. Babylon, that powerful empire, fell within 50 years. Hope was restored.

We are two weeks away from Easter. Next week is Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus not only went into the valley of the shadow of death, but He was plunged into the darkest place of evil – the only One who has been there and come back – not dead but alive forever. He had already demonstrated the power of God in raising Lazarus to life. But His victory on the cross dealt an even more powerful blow to Satan and his lies, and the power of sin over you, so that you can know that 'the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.' (*1 John 4: 4*)

Renewal comes as this promise is fulfilled: 'I will put my Spirit within you and you will live.' (*Ezekiel 37: 14*) Three times in this passage we hear the word of God that whenever this happens, 'You will know that I am the Lord.' (*Ezekiel 37: 6, 13, 14*)

Do you know the Lord? Do you know the presence of the Spirit within you? It doesn't depend on whether you speak in tongues or not; it doesn't depend on your social standing in the community; it doesn't depend on whether you have a position of Christian leadership or not. Do you know what it depends on? It depends on this – for your own life and for the church:

'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (*Joel 2: 28-9, 32*)

'Dry bones' times are inevitable
God's promise to us comes in 'dry bones' times
There will be restoration and renewal in the 'dry bones' times

I have no story to finish with today. Only a testimony to the fact of God breathing his Spirit into my life on countless occasions, bringing renewal, restoration and hope. Ministry cannot happen without the equipping of the Spirit. Mission cannot be undertaken without the Spirit's driving and powerful force. The Church cannot be in existence without the Spirit's presence. Holy Spirit, come.

Prayer:

Lord, so often we do the things we want to do instead of the things you want us to do. So often we fight against you, God, and won't obey your laws. Then there is no real life in us. Lord, we are sorry. Help us to allow our lives to be ruled by your Spirit. Help us to allow our minds to be ruled by your Spirit. Help us to allow our desires to be ruled by your Spirit. Let us live to please you. Let the Spirit of Christ live in us, rule in us, and give us life. Amen.

(Prayer from Light for the Lectionary, Resources for all-age worship)

Resources

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<http://light.scriptureunion.org.uk/>