

## Address – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

This is Pentecost when we remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus.

The Spirit of God bears witness to Jesus.

The Spirit is sent to bring all things to remembrance—so that we may remember Jesus, see and know Jesus and be empowered to witness to Jesus.

Our Lord is the living spring of water around which the Church is built.

We come together to meet Jesus and receive Jesus.

Jesus is the one and only reason we gather.

When we drift away from the most important things to the edges; to the social issues of the day or political agendas or time-fillers of fun and games, then the Church declines. Christianity withers and fades.

Where the Spirit is, there is life and growth; where the Spirit is not, our fellowships are boring, burned-out, hollow, wind-swept, dry and lifeless.

Without the living Spirit, we cling to outside authorities. We sometimes try to hide behind the Bible. We tell ourselves we are Bible-believers and may make strong statements about biblical authority.

If it is a means of grace, then the Spirit works through the ancient words preached or read to make them living within us today. The Holy Spirit makes the words printed on the page come alive to us in our own situations and we gain for ourselves treasures old and new.

Our Old Testament reading is the best known chapter in the book of **Ezekiel**. Maybe people know this passage because of the old African American 'spiritual' that tells about "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones."

In chapter 37 Ezekiel is caught up in the Spirit. In a vision he is transported to a valley. It is the scene of an old battlefield where heavy losses have been suffered. The valley is full of human bones that have been lying out in the hot desert sun. "There were very many bones and they were dry." (Ezekiel 37.2 Good News). God says to the prophet, "Mortal man, can these bones come back to life?"

The answer, of course, is - No. No way! Do hens have teeth? Can the Knights win another grand final?... forget it!

But Ezekiel knows that he is dealing with God... and "impossible" is not how God sees things... so he warily replies, "only you Lord can answer that."

God tells him to speak to the bones and tell them that they will be wrapped with muscles and skin and God will put his breath into them.

So Ezekiel speaks and while he is still speaking there's a rattle, rattle... and the bones come together... and muscles and skin cover them... but there is no breath. God instructs Ezekiel to speak again and tell the spirit to enter the bodies. When he does, they come to life, stand up and form a great army.

The last few verses of our reading from Ezekiel 37.11-14 give us an interpretation of the vision. Now, Ezekiel 33:21 tells us that a fugitive had arrived among the exiles in Babylon bringing news that Jerusalem had fallen. The nation had, to all appearances, perished. Further, Jerusalem was where their faith was centred. Its fall seemed to be a sign that their faith was breaking up. God said that the bones are the people of Israel (Ezekiel 37.11). The people that make up the shattered remains of the nation are prisoners in Babylon and have been in captivity for more than ten years. The hope that they had earlier has now been extinguished. They are like dry bones. "They complain that they are dried up and that they have no hope for the future." (Ezekiel 37.11). But God responds by telling them that he will raise them from death and restore them to their land.

Ezekiel 37.14 tells us: "My Spirit will give you breath, and you will live again. I will bring you home, and you will know that I have kept my promise. I, the Lord, have spoken."

We don't have to think very hard, on this Pentecost Sunday, to realize that there are applications here for us and our situation.

### **Can these bones live? What an important question for the church.**

When people are exiting the church in unprecedented numbers we ask...

Can these bones live?

When so many church buildings are virtually empty of worshipers...

Can these bones live?

When few of those participating in church life are under seventy years old...

Can these bones live?

When most of the community thinks that the church is simply the pretty building in town that needs to be preserved because it is an historic landmark...

Can these bones live?

Others think of the church as a quaint and dying institution that is locked into a moral code that comes from a past generation...

Can these bones live?

And the gospel, that once was once so full of life and strength, is often stripped of its essence by a cynical liberalism or by a simplistic fundamentalism. What is left is just a pile of dry bones. There is no life left there! There's no content left – it is like one of those hollow chocolate eggs we have at Easter - we scratch through the surface and there's nothing inside.

And so, clutching at straws, we are drawn to climb on the latest Christian band wagon. We are told that what we need is emergent worship, missional church, a progressive Christianity, fresh expressions, a decade of evangelism, youth church, a Bible reading challenge, messy church, a conservation project...

All of which may be very good in themselves... but we can be doing them and still be just dry bones.

Can these bones live?

It's God who asks the question (Ezekiel 37.3). Is there any hope for my people? Is there a prospect of life for my people? It is when the Lord breathes on the bones, when he gives them his Spirit that they come to life.

For without the life of the Spirit:

- the scriptures and the liturgy are dry as dust.
- the most creative worship techniques are just a matter of going through the motions.
- our theology is lifeless dogma.
- the Christian life is a mere display of respectability.

We need the breath of heaven. And God asks, "Can these bones come back to life?"

Ezekiel responds: "only you can answer that." (Ezekiel 37.3) There is nothing we can do to make ourselves lively Christians. We need the Spirit that God offers to us. And his word to the church this Pentecost Sunday is to look to God for the resources to bring life and vitality to the church.

The church needs the power from on high.

May we seek for God's power to come into our situations – to refresh, to enliven, to create new hope. But be careful – this is God's Spirit and he doesn't move to our dictates! He will do things in his way and in his time.

Can these bones live?

"My Spirit will give you breath, and you will live again... I the Lord have spoken. "  
(Ezekiel 37.14)

From Psalm 104:29-30 we read: <sup>29</sup>When you turn away, they are afraid;  
when you take away your breath, they die and go back to the dust from which  
they came. <sup>30</sup>But when you give them breath, they are created;  
you give new life to the earth."

Amen.