

Can These Bones Live?

Intro

10 years ago, a young mum and her three children found her way into the church where I was a minister. I quickly discovered that she was a woman in great distress. She spoke no English, her young family were in great danger. How she arrived on our doorstep I do not know, she was a picture of hopelessness, in a strange country, with no resources and no one to care for her - and the responsibility of a young family.

The church community reached out to her and SAMH – the charity that deals with mental health issues engaged with her. Not that she had mental health issues but because of the fragility and vulnerability of her situation.

SAMH found her a house, we brought food and warm clothes for her and the children. I could see that she was the type of mum who wanted what was best for her children. The food that she wanted was vegetables and fruit and she immediately made home-made soup for her children. Obviously she had escaped from something or somewhere to find sanctuary.

Slowly, she made some progress and ten years later she is speaking fluent English, her oldest son is in University and my daughter bumped into her last week, and she was beaming and in a much better place than she was 10 years earlier.

She was a young woman of faith, there was always an open Bible in her house and God was in her journey.

Today we are thinking about hoping against all the odds and the words of God to Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?”

Picture the scene: a valley of dead bones. It's not too difficult when we think of places like Ethiopia and other famine- and drought-stricken places of the world. Valleys of dead bones. Starving children, malnutrition and other diseases.

It's a painful picture and one that I'm sure we would rather not look at.

Eugene Peterson, in the Message translates the story. “God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones.”

I like that translation. *God grabbed me!*

Sometimes in life, we need God to grab us. To literally lift us up and transport us to the valley of dead bones. It was almost like that for us in Church, God grabbed this young woman and set her before us to see what God can do through us in a hopeless situation.

Why does God do this to Ezekiel?

He wants Ezekiel to feel the pain of what has happened to his people. He wants him to get down his knees and ask for God's help.

We all like passages in the Bible about God leading us by still waters and making us to lie down in green pastures.

But today's image is not so comfortable. He grabs us and sets us down in the valley of dead bones.

It's a hopeless situation. The valley is a picture of humans beyond all hope.

The historical context is that Israel has been conquered, crushed, in captivity, but it is also a scene of restoration. While this vision recorded in Ezekiel 37 was to Israel, there are spiritual applications for us.

What situations are hopeless in our world today.

Many will say **Climate Change and the damage to the planet**

Last night was earth hour, an opportunity for people all around our world to switch off their electricity for an hour. To give the planet a rest.

As we look around our world today and we see horrendous things, floods in Pakistan, cyclone in Malawi, tornadoes in America, and we see devastation in a scale that has not been seen before and the danger is that we come blasé to what's going on. Can these dead bones live?

The Church

Secondly, when we look at our Church in the Western world – we may well ask the question – can these bones live? Particularly at this time in the Church of Scotland, the church that many of you signed up to 50 – 70 years ago is disappearing – buildings closing, ministries reduced – falling finances and the list of negatives go on and the question must be asked, can these bones live? Is there a future for the Church of Scotland and if so, how will it happen?

People

As we look around the world today, we see greed and selfishness in a scale not known to us before. We see problems at the top level of government and policing. I'm sure we ask, "What has gone wrong? Why are people acting like this? Can these bones live?"

Is there hope for our world in the midst of climate change, is there hope for our Church in the midst of spiritual decline? Is there hope for our leaders as they serve their own interests?

Well, our passage today throws some light into dead situations.

Notice it is the Spirit of the Lord that sets Ezekiel down in the valley. When Jesus went into the wilderness, it was the Spirit that drove him there.

Jesus went into the wilderness for a purpose and that was to test his calling as the Son of God. *If you are the Son of God* the Devil says to him...

Ezekiel goes to this wilderness place also to be tested, and the test comes in the words that God says to him. *Can these bones live?*

It's a question of faith.

Perhaps we need God to set us down and ask the question, can these bones live?

Can new life come to lifeless situations?

God's question to Ezekiel: *Can these bones live?*

And Ezekiel replies to the Lord, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know!" Such was the devastation; it was beyond human repair.

His question travels down the centuries to us today...Can these bones live? Can new life come from dead situations? Can we reverse the effects of climate change? Can we turn the tide on spiritual decline of the Church? Can we change the hearts of our leaders?

But God does not let Ezekiel off the hook. God uses Ezekiel, to prophesy to the dead bones. God invites us to work with him. It's easy to say, *God, only you know. God, only you can do it.* We want to pass the buck and let God sort things out. But God has other ideas....

He wants us to engage with the situation. He doesn't want us to be spectators but participators with him.

Yes, he created this world but he places us human beings to be its stewards. Yes, he initiated the Church but he calls us to be fellow builders with him.

Yes, he has placed leaders in control but he wants us to choose wisely who leads us and to pray for them.

Ezekiel speaks God's word to the dead bones. He speaks into the dead situation and speaks words of hope...He brings to the dead bones God's message and God's message is a message of life and not death. God's message is a message of resurrection and hope.

What is the message from God to this lifeless situation? "I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you and put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realise that I am God."

God is in this dead situation, just as he was with Jesus in the tomb. He can turn deadness into life. Can you imagine how Ezekiel felt, as he heard sounds, rustling and the bones moving together and , sinews formed, muscles on the bone, skin stretched over them. It is like something out of a science fiction film.

But God wasn't finished with them. There was still another task for Ezekiel. The newly formed bodies were lifeless and so God told him that his next task was to prophesy again this time to the breath (which is the same word for spirit) and he was to invite the breath from the four winds and breathe into the slain that they may live - and then they arose as a mighty army.

God through Ezekiel had resurrected his people. He had brought new life to them.

This is an encouraging message for our world, our Church and people today. But it also points to the ultimate resurrection.

The vision of dry bones demonstrates the enormous power of God, the glorious truth that God has the power to conquer even death. He who has the power to resurrect the dead nation of Israel also has the power to resurrect the dead bodies of the human race. He can find all the minute particles (atoms, protons, or whatever) that made up the body of a dead person and refashion them into the original human body. And God's Holy Word declares that He will do this. He will resurrect the dead. A day of resurrection is coming, a day when He will raise up every human being who has ever lived. All will stand before Him to give an account for their lives, whether good or bad. Some will inherit eternal life, and some will be condemned to eternal death. But that's for Easter morning!

Even when things are bleak and all around us life is crumbling. Let us look to God and yes ask him to take us to that place of dead bones, the valley of death, because when we are there, we are close to God. God is already there! He said, *when you walk through the valley – remember that I am with you, you do not need to be afraid, because you are walking at my side and my rod and staff will protect you and guide you.*

We have a God who is in the valley with us, and that valley may be different for each person here. The valleys that each country face will be different and the valley that we all face is different but hold on to the hope that we have, that God is in the valley with you and if God is there, then it's not hopeless.

But he may well ask you to help Him, and to speak into the darkness and the hopelessness, words of life and comfort.

Jesus said, *I have come to give life and life in all its fullness* and so for us as Christians we are people who bring life and speak life into lifeless situations.

It's a word for our planet this morning, there is hope in these dead bones? But God wants us to play our part in the saving and protection of His world.

God gave Ezekiel this vision to let the people know that there was still a source of hope and security in their lives – God Himself. He had not forgotten them; He had not forsaken them; He was not finished with them. Because of their sin, that's exactly what they deserved, but God, in His mercy and grace, revealed that He is sovereign over everything that is going on and that one day He is going to restore Israel to her land and, even more importantly, restore them spiritually. If they will trust in Him, they can have hope right now, even in the midst of circumstances that look completely hopeless.

That's the message for us this morning, let God grab you and set you down in that valley, that you might see and feel the pain of others and so let God work through you to bring life and hope.