

## THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

Romans 8. 6-11

John 11. 1-45

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

The verses that we heard a moment ago, often referred to as the ‘Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones’, are arguably the most famous verses in all the book of Ezekiel. Their importance is signalled by their placement in our Lectionary: this year, we hear this text on Passion Sunday; next year, it will be read at Pentecost; and this text is one of the choices offered every year for the celebration of the Easter Vigil.

This text is the third of Ezekiel’s four visions that he receives from God.<sup>1</sup> Transported by the Spirit of the Lord to ‘the valley’, Ezekiel is astonished to see that it is filled with a multitude of disconnected and thoroughly desiccated bodies. The image is of a battlefield whose slain have never received proper burial, but were left to decay and were ravaged by birds and beasts. Having led Ezekiel around these piles of bones, God asks him a question: ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ And the prophet’s response is enigmatic: ‘O Lord God, you know’. The Lord then orders Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones (as if they had ears to hear!); and in response to the prophet’s words, the bones are re-membered, bound by sinews, re-fleshed, covered with skin, and animated by the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

The vision proper is followed by another speech from God, which is actually a promise directed to Ezekiel’s fellow Jews who have been deported to Babylon. God

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<sup>1</sup> The others appear in 1. 1-3. 5; 8. 1-11. 25; and 40. 1-48. 35.

<sup>2</sup> The verb ‘breathe’ in verse 9 is the same used in Gen 2. 7 to describe how God, having formed a human body from the soil, breathed into its nostrils the breath of life.

tells Ezekiel that the bones are in fact ‘the *whole house* of Israel’.<sup>3</sup> The Jews who found themselves in exile have been lamenting that their bones are dried up; that their hope has perished; and that they are utterly cut off. They feel metaphorically as if they are already dead.

God instructs Ezekiel to inform his audience that their present situation and consequent despair will be transformed. God will open their graves, bring them forth from those graves, and return them to their home, the land of Israel. It is as if the Jews will be given a new exodus, reminiscent of the one that they had when they miraculously fled from Egypt.

And when the Lord says to Ezekiel, ‘you shall know that I am the Lord’, God points to his greater purpose in all this activity. He intends that all of Israel will know, and acknowledge, that he is the only God, unrivalled in power and sovereignty. He promises that he will put his Spirit in his people; and that they shall *live*. The people of God have a special, covenant-based relationship with him; and with the aid of his Spirit, they shall be enabled to follow his statutes and ordinances and to live the life of blessedness that he wishes to give them.

This third vision of Ezekiel describes what one could call a seemingly impossible event; but Ezekiel’s precise intention is to show his fellow exiles that there are absolutely no limits to God’s power. The prophet’s people have not had the privilege of directly seeing the divine vision, as Ezekiel had done; but he hopes that they will ‘see’ it through his astonished eyes.

Yes, Ezekiel has indeed been given a vision of God; but we could also say that he has been given ‘God’s vision’. And it leads us to ask, what does it mean to look at our world, and at ourselves, through God’s eyes?

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘whole house’ of Israel includes both the fallen kingdom of Judah and Israel’s northern kingdom, destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BCE.

Ezekiel's fellow deportees lament that they are (as good as) dead. Their hope has perished, and without hope, they might as well be dead. The future, if ever one can speak of such, seems as barren as the past years and present experience of exile. Moreover, as Ezekiel himself has repeatedly insisted, the suffering of his people is God's just punishment for a history of unrelenting rebelliousness and sin. We can imagine that for the Jews, given the past collapse of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and their current situation, good news (for many at least) was hard to hear and perhaps impossible to envision.

When, in a vision, God brought Ezekiel out to a broad valley and showed him the mounds of desiccated and dismembered bones, the prophet saw them through his own eyes. As we have already seen, his answer to God's question ('Mortal, can these bones live?') can be interpreted in at least two ways: either as an affirmative, or as an uncertain throwing of the ball back into God's court. We can well imagine that in order to start prophesying, Ezekiel had to make a leap of faith.

But then, when the bones began rattling and began to come together as skeletons, suddenly Ezekiel was no longer looking at them through his own eyes. His vision was lifted to a higher plane; and now he was viewing them through God's eyes. The skeletons were clothed with flesh and skin and made alive by breath, and they stood up on their feet!

In recounting his vision, Ezekiel challenges his fellow exiles and future generations of his readers to view their circumstances not through their own limited vision, but through *God's eyes*. Can these bones live? Of course not. But look at them through God's eyes, and watch bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Watch as ligaments bind them together, as flesh blankets them, and as skin seals them tightly. Watch as God's Spirit, which heals hopelessness, infuses them, so that they rise up – a great army testifying to the power of God. Can corpses be brought forth from

graves and become living beings again? Absurd! But look through *God's eyes*, and watch them come up, receive God's Spirit, and return home. When we raise our vision to look beyond what our mundane eyes can see, *we watch the impossible happen through God's eyes*.

'I can't believe my eyes' we say, when we have witnessed an utterly unanticipated and/or seemingly impossible event take place. But we can believe God's eyes and, looking through them, glimpse unimagined reasons to keep on hoping, though the desert be dry and dark, and though the promised land seem far, far away.

Ezekiel urges his audience to view their situation through the eyes of a God for whom all things are possible. Ezekiel's fellow exiles were at the point of zero, as good as dead and without hope. Facile words of assurance could not cut through their despair. But Ezekiel invited them to view reality through God's eyes by means of a divine vision, in which the 'zero' is transformed into new algebra.

As we enter Passiontide, we will again consider the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Surely, for our Lord's friends and family – for those who had pinned their hopes and trust in him – the cross must have seemed to be the darkest of 'zeros'; the hardest of deaths, not only for Christ, but for their hopes. And yet, that instrument of scandalous, disgraceful death became for all Christians a powerful symbol of hope; of life beyond death; of salvation.

Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel, in speaking of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, said that every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again. Like the exiles of old, we too at times can feel as good as dead. We may feel null and void inside. But if we look through God's eyes, we can see broader realities and a basis for hope. God can sustain us and fill our barren experiences with

lively hope. Is it possible? No, say disbelievers. But look with God's vision and watch it happen!

Amen.