



Written Worship

for Leeds South & West Methodist Circuit

2023.03.26 5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

A call to worship:

O Lord our God, we bring you our praises;
would you gather them up and put them together,
that they may be more than they seem to us;
more than the sum of their parts.

O Lord our God we bring you our praises;
will you gather them together from all our separate places,
so we may be one in the light of your love.

StF 1/H&P 1 All people that on earth do dwell

A Prayer: Glory be to you the God of heaven,
Glory be to you the Creator of Earth,
Glory be to you the Source of life.

Thanks be to you the Christ of the cross,
Thanks be to you the healer of nations,
Thanks be to you the teacher of wisdom.

Praise be to you the spirit of power,
Praise be to you the guide of the lost,
Praise be to you the breather of life.

You bring us meaning - You bring us purpose

Forgive us for our failure, all that we have done badly, all that we have not
done well, all that is broken within us - we place at your feet.

Be with us now, be with us still, here in this place, and when we leave,
Protect our sleep, live in our waking, fill our hearts, fill our minds.
With visions of your kingdom, and stories of your son Jesus,

The source of our redemption, and the test of our wisdom - Amen

And so we join in saying the Lord's Prayer...

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11: 38-45

Sermon:

Between Ezekiel's Valley of dry bones and John's recounting of the raising of Lazarus, we can find a clear theme of both death and resurrection in today's readings. As we approach Easter that knowledge of resurrection, and the promise of life everlasting is at the forefront of our minds. It's hard to grasp the eternal; to get our heads around what forever is all about, but we can consider the nature of resurrection and how it is part of God's plan for us - Not just after death, but also here in the midst of life as we negotiate our way through the struggles of being God's people in the world today.

God tells Ezekiel to command the dry bones to come together, to reform, for flesh to come onto the bones, and tell the bones that God will breathe the breath of life back into them. This is a strange story and I think it is easy to miss the depth of the message because we are put off by that strangeness of the imagery. This is one of many visions that Ezekiel has. He is a strange man prone to peculiar episodes, at the beginning of his book he meets with God and sees these strange monsters, these angelic creatures coming out from the desert sands with six wings and four faces and following them are wheels covered with eyes, they sound more bizarre than any alien I've seen on Doctor Who.

I think it helps us to recognise that these unsettling stories are visions and should not be taken as literal occurrences. However, I think it is also helpful for us to be aware of the real unsettling and unsettled context that this man was living in. Ezekiel was a 'would be' temple priest, taken into exile just before he could qualify as a priest at the age of 30, living through a war in which he was on the losing side; living in an open internment camp; taken into exile by the Babylonians. Taken from Jerusalem, from his friends and family, from his culture; taken from his sense of future and his sense of past, uprooted and placed in a strange land.

Psalm 137 asks "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?". The same psalm talks of how their captors forced them to sing songs of their God.

Ezekiel was in one of the camps along the river Kebar; a large man-made irrigation canal, where the captives were employed in the work of growing food to feed their captors empire. How could they translate their understanding of God into this alien situation where their God had left them on the losing side?

There were ghosts from Ezekiel's past that he clearly didn't want to deal with. He had lost his wife, we neither know when nor how, but we can be certain that in this time of war he didn't take time to come to terms with his loss. Ezekiel 24 God would take away the delight of Ezekiel's eyes with one blow, that he should not weep or lament or employ the customary acts of mourning. Ezekiel was a man suffering the trauma of war and his stories reflect that, but they also reflect hope in what is to come and a search for God's presence even in the darkest of places.

And so we may look at this valley of dry bones as a metaphor for the sense of devastation that was being felt by Ezekiel and his fellow people. It is too easy for us to remain distant from these ancient stories, but for him they were close, raw and totally reflecting the troubles of his life. In remaining emotionally distant from them we miss the significance of Ezekiel's ability to see the possibility of new life being breathed into this devastated nation. This was a people who had lost all hope or sense of identity, but Ezekiel saw this chance of the breath of God; the Spirit of God bringing a fresh start to his people, and the sense that God wanted him to help make this moment real, no doubt meant everything to Ezekiel.

Both Ezekiel and the story of Lazarus come to us before the resurrection of Jesus in the Bible. Whilst they both talk about the eternal and magnificent plans of God, they are also about the here and now; they are as much about life before death as they are about life after death.

In our Gospel reading, Lazarus had been dead for so long that Martha was complaining how the body had started to stink. Sometimes life stinks, and in the midst of life's stinkyness it's hard to see where God's going to bring out the Glory, it's hard to imagine when the good things are going to start happening. Even so, Lazarus does come back to life and Ezekiel sees this vision of the dry bones, he sees his people filled with the breath of life once again.

A lot of Christians in this country, when we look at our churches today, we say to ourselves 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off'.

Yet God's people have been through worse than this, and God has brought us back from those dark places. Through each dark time God has taught us something new about what it is to be human, and what it is to be a people of hope and of compassion. And so let's continue to seek God, to be filled with that hope of the eternal and find ways to bring that eternal hope into the each other's lives each day that we live on this earth, because God is still with us. And as we see the hope of spring arriving; the promise of Easter and resurrection on the horizon, let's not forget the important lessons we have learned through darker times.

StF 391/H&P 777 O breath of life, come sweeping through us

Prayers of Intercession:

We pray for your Church throughout the world in all its diverse forms, may we know your hope in every dark place.

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer**

We pray for the down-trodden, the oppressed and the poor, and we pray for all those who keep them there, may we all learn from our dark places how to show your love

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer**

We pray for those we know who are suffering, in body mind or spirit, may they be uplifted in your love, and may we also know your healing hand upon our lives.

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer**

We thank you for all those who have gone before us, who have been through their own dark places, and have shown us the path through the darkness, towards the hope the light and the love of your kingdom.

Amen

Hymn: StF 410/H&P 804 Lord Your Church on Earth is seeking

A Blessing: May we live with your blessing – the blessing of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with us each and every day. **Amen**