

21st March 2021, Lent 5, Passion Sunday: 'A Truth-Speaking journey' (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

'The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.'

'Then Jesus breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit."'

These two passages – from Genesis chapter 2 and John chapter 20 – define the big story of the bible: namely that **God is the author and giver of life**, and, more than that, that this amazing, loving God longs to share that life with his creation eternally. The tree of life which sits at the heart of Eden finds itself also at the heart of the restored creation of eternity.

And yet, for many of us, the journey from creation to new creation often feels like walking through a valley of dry bones. It certainly does at the moment. It's one of the reasons we find this iconic passage from the book of the Prophet Ezekiel so powerful. We may never have seen such a vision literally – thankfully – but it's a picture which captures the sense of loss and challenge, the sort of image which demands our attention at present.

And it always poses the question: **where is hope? 'Can these bones live?'**

For Ezekiel this was a pressing matter: Israel was in exile, apparently rejected by God, judged for its disobedience and apathetic spirituality. And into this situation, God calls Ezekiel: **'Prophecy to these bones!'** Speak life over them. It is a word of hope, a word of resurrection. It links the creation of humanity in Genesis, with Jesus' re-creation of a new humanity in John, able to be intimate with the Almighty Lord of life and love, the true and living God. Breathe life into these bones, Ezekiel: I have come for life, and life in all its fullness.

But how? Where is the power? **With God, true life-giving power is always found in the same two places: in God's Word and God's Spirit**. That's exactly what we see here. The first thing Ezekiel declares is: 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' (v4) Nowadays we associate that line with a funny song, which makes us laugh but robs the words of their power. Let's recapture that today: it is the word of God that brings life, that leads us from death to resurrection.

It has always been so. In the beginning, the word of God speaks life into being: 'Let there be light.' In the time of Jesus, he declares that renewed humanity must worship God in spirit and in truth – the same two things. Later he says: 'my words are full of the Spirit and life.'

Where is life to be found? In the truth of God's word. It is the truth that sets us free.

But this truth has a companion: the Spirit of God. Indeed the Spirit can only work in power where there is life-giving truth – since God does not, and cannot, lie. And so the word of life is accompanied in Ezekiel's great prophecy by the indwelling presence of God: 'I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.' The word joins the bones, but the breath of God makes them live.

This is a word for the church in our culture. On this Sunday a year ago, we were coming to terms with churches being forcibly closed for the first time in 100 years. Two days later a full lockdown was declared. It was easy to ask: can these bones live?

But God has brought life. We may still long for the day when we can meet again in freedom and safety, but the Word of God and the Spirit of God have done what they've always done: brought life in unexpected ways. Today we commemorate a year of meeting online, and I want to say thank you to all of you who've supported the journey or joined us along the way.

We don't yet know where the journey will take us. We remain in the valley, trying to hear the word of the Lord. But what we affirm today is that **God is always the bringer of life.** God speaks into desperate situations, he breathes into them bringing hope and a future.

And in the end, God always brings life through these two things, whether for Ezekiel's culture or ours: through the power of truth and the power of his presence, his Holy Spirit. And so we prophesy to the bones in our church, in our culture: 'Hear the Word of the Lord!' Receive the breath of God. For if God graciously comes to us again, and puts his Spirit in us, then we will surely live. Amen.