

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 29 March 2020

Ezekiel 37.1-14. *Can these dry bones live?*

I'm in the field just by the vicarage: we often walk here; and it's our very own valley of dry bones.

Last summer there was sadly a dead sheep here: but over the next few months the local wildlife did its work and soon all that was left was a skeleton. In due course those bones were themselves pulled apart, and scattered all over the place.

It's hard to think that these old, dry, dead bones were a living breathing sheep only last summer.

God showed Ezekiel his vision of the valley of dry bones because the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon; like these bones they had been scattered, cut off from their beloved homeland and Temple, cut off, it felt, from life itself. Ezekiel describes them as being 'in the grave'.

And now we may feel we know what that feels like. Which of us envisaged a situation where, while facing a time of national crisis, we would be prevented from facing it together?: from visiting the vulnerable to offer companionship and help, or the sick to offer care; from being at the bedside as someone passes away, or from coming together for a celebration funeral on losing a loved one?

Like these bones, we are meant to be joined up – not torn apart and scattered. And if this is true of families, and of friends – it is also true of a church family like St Christopher's. Coming together is at the heart of what we do and who we are – and it can leave us feeling like scattered, dry bones when, suddenly, we are forced to stay apart. Two weeks ago we were disappointed that we couldn't shake hands, share coffee, or take the communion cup: what we'd give to just be able to meet together now – coffee or no coffee!

But Ezekiel's vision is one of hope – not despair. As he watches, the bones rattle into action, and, from their scattered places, gather, and join themselves together into an army of skeletons. Next, muscle, tendons, skin, form on top of them – imagine my dead sheep, woolly fleece and all, re-forming before my eyes! But, even now, they are just bones and flesh; still dead.

So God commands Ezekiel, 'prophesy to the wind!'. Ezekiel knows this doesn't just mean the wind you can hear blowing around me now, but that it represents God's Spirit. So he calls on that wind, that Spirit, to fill these complete but lifeless bodies: and they live! And this is God's assurance, his promise, that he will raise his people up from the grave of separation, of exile, and bring them back to life; a promise which was indeed fulfilled when they were finally restored back to their own land.

Resurrection, restoration: it's what our God does – as we will remember supremely in a fortnight's time at Easter.

We are quite right to put hope in – and to support and appreciate – the unprecedented efforts of our political leaders, our scientists, our health and key workers. They are working unstintingly for our recovery, our restoration, our rebuilding. But this vision also tells us that we need God's spirit – in our lives, in our church, and in our country. Otherwise, we can put everything back together, join everything up; but still be missing that vital spark of life which only the spirit of God can breathe into us. If I we could pray for one good thing to come out of this crisis it should be that many in our world would come to know that truth, and to receive that Spirit of life.

One more thing. The great hope, the great truth, which Ezekiel's vision holds out to us, is that we don't have to wait for the return from exile to know God's resurrected life: it is available to us now – even as we are isolated and separated. If our experience over the last couple of weeks has taught us anything it is that the body of Christ, the Church, continues to be living, active and joined up; even in physical separation.

For God's promise is that we don't have to wait: we have that Spirit now: we are that connected, living body now; we may feel like dry, dead, separated bones – but we're not. By his Spirit we are joined to Christ. And we are joined to one another.