

Sunday 22 May 2022
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Easter 6

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Acts 16:9-15

John 14:23-29

The passage from Ezekiel describing what we now universally call the Valley of the Dry Bones is, I think, one of the most amazing passages in scripture.

What Ezekiel has been hearing from all the people around him is a level of despair more akin to a living death. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost" they moan. They are incapable of change or growth because they simply can't conceive of the possibility of life.

As it happens, God completely agrees with them about their condition. They are lifeless, spiritless, destined for nothing better than a shadowy grave. But, that said, they need not be without hope.

So God takes Ezekiel to this valley full of dry bones and makes him prophesy. Think about that for a moment - there's this man, alone in this valley of dust and death, shouting out, calling on life, breath and spirit to return, And then, seeing the response as those bones collect themselves, take on flesh and begin to be alive.

Having said all that, it's perfectly clear and obvious that this life is not natural. It doesn't come from the bones themselves; it comes from God. And this is the message that the prophet Ezekiel is trying to convey to the people of Israel. They have lost their way and God is going to give them his own breath, his own spirit, so that the life they live will be God's. In their parlous state their absence of life and hope is to be remedied by God's gift of his own presence. A gift which amounts to life itself.

Then in our Gospel reading we find Jesus also talking about absence and presence.

The whole of the Last Supper is overshadowed by the knowledge that it is the end. The disciples may not have quite got what was going to happen and just how soon, but they must have picked up some inkling as Jesus attempted to prepare them for the time when he would no longer be with them.

In this passage, Jesus is setting out all the ways that, come what may, he will still be with them.

Firstly, he will be with them he says, whenever they remember and try to stay faithful to what he has taught them.

Next, as they try to continue in love and commitment to Jesus, they will be carrying on his own work of making God present to those they meet.

And, by extension from all this, if they are where God is, then by definition Jesus will be there also.

But lastly, because Jesus is nothing if not realistic about his followers, he doesn't expect them to manage all this on their own.

The Holy Spirit is to come as a catalyst for the presence of God.

A bit like Ezekiel's dry bones, their new life isn't something they have inside them waiting to be activated, it is a gift from God.

So, in what feels like a kind of circular argument, God is asking them to carry on making him present, just as Jesus does and he is giving them his own life to make that possible.

Over and over again, in God's great and gracious plan, we see that we are asked to do and to give what has already been done and given to us by God.

We are given forgiveness and are asked to forgive;

we are given love and are asked to love;

we are given God and are asked to make him a home with us.

Our dry bones don't have to generate their own life.

Well, we all know what happened next.

We know that the disciples went straight from listening to this great promise from Jesus to a state of total confusion and despair.

But we also know that the promised new life did somehow percolate their dry bones and they did rise to the task of sharing God's life and love with the world around them, and that critically, whenever they did, they found that God was there already.

And if you want an example of all that, you need go no further than our earlier reading from Acts.

In this, the story of Lydia, we hear that... "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul".

You could be tempted into thinking that it was Paul's eloquence and fervour that converted Lydia, but Luke, the author of Acts, makes it absolutely clear that God was at work on both sides of that conversation.

And this is the message for the church, nothing is impossible with God. Dry bones can live.

And if that's true for the church at large, then it is also true for each of us individually.

Amen.