

Sermon for March 29 2020

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

Note: This sermon is also available to listen to on the church website www.stoswalds.org.uk and what is written here is a digital copy of that speech done using software so the occasional word might have been misheard by the software!

Heavenly Father, through your holy Spirit you will reveal your scriptures to us that they may bear fruit in our lives for all to see and you'll be glorified in Jesus name we pray Amen.

My mother grew up in a Welsh mining Village had a very, very strong community feel and as it was centred around a coal mine; and in the bad old days of mining, safety wasn't as it should have been. Death was quite common and in the village it wasn't a taboo subject and it was discussed. My mother told me she used to ask people how so-and-so died to which the answer was often given: 'short of breath'. Now that irritated her she really wanted the correct reason, but in a way short of breath is correct. That which gave us life at the beginning of our lives and in creation had ceased to dwell in that person and breath is such an important word, spiritually. It is vital to our life and our well-being.

The song, 'Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew' and our first reading is all about that breath. The breath breathed into those dead bones. Without sounding like a Hebrew scholar, which I'm clearly not, this word for breath did interest me. The Hebrew word is Ruah or Ruach. Hebrew has actually quite a small vocabulary and they use the same word for many things so the word is often used for wind, spirit and air as well as breath. In fact in the Old Testament it occurs 377 times. The second verse of the Bible:

*'The Earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a **wind** from God swept over the face of the waters'.*

Ruah present in creation. In the account of the flood, those that had the **breath** of God in them were saved – Ruah. God sent a **wind** and the water subsided. Later on when God send the plagues on Egypt in the Eighth plague God sent the east **wind** and it brought the locust. That same word Ruah was used.

Don't worry I'm not going to go through all 377 but this word, Ruah was also the word that appears in the vision of the valley of the dry bones the vision that God Gave to Jesus breathed into Lazarus. That same spirit of God that was a power also of Christ's Resurrection.

Looking at the Ezekiel Passage in a bit more detail. Chapter 37 is perhaps the most well-known in a book which has some complex and occasionally bizarre imagery. Ezekiel himself was a priest and a prophet. We are looking at just after 587 BC. This was the time when Judah and Jerusalem were taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This was the

start of the exile and for those who were in Exile there were feelings of despair. Ezekiel himself asks God in chapter 11:

'Ah lord God will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel'.

Psalm 137: *'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion'.*

So god decides to give Ezekiel a vision and in this vision there are some key points for us to grasp.

The vision takes place in a valley very similar in meaning to Psalm 32, the valley of the shadow of death. We can contrast valley to mountains. Mount Sinai was where God came down to meet his people represented by Moses. The mountain was Jesus Christ was transfigured. Jesus taught from mountains and so the Hebrew word Shamayim means; above, heaven, sky that which is above. So, contrasting this to valley we have the Hebrew word Sheol often used for grave, pit, below, Hades sometimes. So for the Jews they had this idea of Shamayim; that which is above and Sheol; that which is below and so this valley is very much a valley which is below.

Ezekiel was about to walk about among the bones. He needed to experience the desolation. God was showing him the state of his people as he later explained. In their sin, Judah was dead to God and I think this has a very missional feel for us. Ezekiel was called to go to that which was dead, that which was lost, that which was disillusioned. In the same way we are also called as children of God to move out into the situations which are hopeless, which are devoid of life.

Ezekiel was asked if life could once again come to the bones and as he was a man who was righteous, (he knew God and he was not only the prophet at the book but he was also a priest and he had faith) yet he didn't rush in with the answer. I would have said, 'of course you can', but Ezekiel sought God's wisdom: *'Only you know'*, and I think this is the point of the story which can bring so much to us. This is such a great phrase for us to use: *'Only you know, not me.'*

As Ezekiel was obedient, God gave him a task to do and he did it without question despite the circumstances – a valley full of bones! Additionally, we have in this account a complete restoration process but notice it didn't happen all at once. The first stage was the body reassembly, but true life only came later and notice, it was from the four winds. Such a poetic phrase meaning the whole world. God spirit coming from everywhere to be breathed into those restored people. This is reminiscent of God creating Adam. He was created bodily, then God's breath was breathed into him. God's restoration of Israel was not something that would happen instantly. Even though the people might be built up, only true life can begin if God's spirit is breathed into the people and I think this is a good message for us. We live in an immediate world but God will take his time and his way in rebuilding.

Sometimes we pray and expect immediate answers. God will do things his way and in his time.

It's interesting to note that even though the bodies were complete and whole, they were lifeless and in the world we live in, we see people who on the outside seem completely whole even thriving and yet spiritually inside they may be dying. They may not have God's spirit within them. Life is not life without God spirit. In verse 14 of the Ezekiel passage God says, *'I will put my spirit within you and you shall live'*. Jesus said to his disciples in John 10 verse 10, *'The thief only comes to steal and kill and destroy I have come that they may have life and have it to the full'* and this fullness of life in Christ is only possible because of Ruah, God's spirit dwelling within us.

At the very end of John's Gospel we read Jesus saying

'Peace be with you as the father has sent me I am sending you and with that he breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit.'

Paul tells the Romans (6:4)

'We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father we too may have a new life'.

Later he says (6:11),

'In the same way count yourself dead to sin but alive to God Christ.'

This spirit of God is *true* life. It is the spirit that Jesus gave to the early church. It is the spirit that came at Pentecost and it is the same spirit that dwells in us. God breathes life into that which is dead. What might we consider as dead or hopeless? Maybe our health, our career our social life, maybe a relationship or possibly our faith. In our current situation with Coronavirus, many might see the situation as hopeless and feelings of despair will well up but know that |God did and still does breathe life into seemingly hopeless situations. What we might see as dead, the Spirit of God can restore to life. What we might view, conversely, as whole and full, might inside be empty and lifeless.

Ezekiel allowed himself to be taken to see that which is lifeless and so I feel we should be on the lookout for that which is lifeless and in these current times, were possible we need to be on the lookout where there is less life than there should be.

Ezekiel allowed himself to be an instrument of God in sending God's spirit into a dead situation and we too should call upon God's Spirit to work in situations that we may see and regard as hopeless. The message of this passage of Ezekiel is one of hope. God's Spirit can be breathed into the most hopeless of situations and God's life can restore.

Remember, *with God all things are possible*. Matthew 9:26. Amen