

# Parishes of St Philips and All Saints Kew with St Luke's Kew

Where all God's children are Welcome

## Bible Study for the first week of the Covid 19 church building closure

### Section 1: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

**Prayer:** Almighty God, we thank you that you speak to us through the Bible. Open this passage to us as we read, and enable us to understand your ways better as we explore your word. Amen.

Read the passage through twice.

#### Ezekiel 37 : 1-14

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

<sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

<sup>11</sup> Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' <sup>12</sup> Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. <sup>14</sup> I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"

After a quick rendition of "the knee bone's connected to the thigh bone" just to get that out of your system, here is some background.

Ezekiel was a young priest at the Temple in Jerusalem who was sent into exile in Babylon after the destruction of the Kingdom of Judea in 598 BC. He was a devout man, who sought out places of worship with other faithful Jews, and as he prayed, God gave him extraordinary visions (Chapter 1) and then gave him the function of a prophet to the exiled people. By the time we reach Chapter 37, God has started to prepare his people, through Ezekiel, for their return home.

- Many parts of this passage are out of the ordinary
  - Ezekiel says he is "brought out by the spirit of the Lord" – is that what we would call the Holy Spirit?
  - Was he physically lifted from where he was to this valley?
  - The valley is full of dry bones – offensive and unclean to a good Jew. This is not promising...
  - The conversation between "the spirit of the Lord" and Ezekiel is very stilted
  - The command to prophecy to the dry bones is decidedly strange

- “Thus says the Lord...” is the staple of prophets. It means that the prophet is acting as the mouthpiece of God, not expressing his personal opinion or his own desire.
  - “breath” is going to enter into these bones, and they will be re-created
    - There is a play here on the Hebrew word for breath, wind and spirit – all three are rendered by the same word, all three therefore “hovered over the face of the deep” on the first day of creation, so the “spirit of the Lord” who is speaking to Ezekiel is the divine creative force that will revivify these lifeless bones.
  - Ezekiel is an obedient prophet: he says what God commands him to say, and humanity is rebuilt, layer by layer, but still there is no life
  - Ezekiel is then called to “prophesy to the breath” – to command the life-giving power of God to enter into these almost human beings – again, the play of breath/wind/spirit continues and resurrection/re-creation occurs before Ezekiel’s eyes.
- At that point, the vision, the words, the actions, the transformed contents of the valley shift to a metaphor for the people of Israel.
    - The vision is for Ezekiel’s benefit only, so that his faith is strong enough to take the message of resurrection – return from exile – to the enslaved people of Israel.
  - The Babylonian exile lasted for 70 years. Had the people given up hope of returning to their land?
  - How easy would it be for a prophet to stand up amongst them and give them this message of hope?
  - We don’t know how far into that exile this vision occurs and this message is given – has the young Ezekiel grown old? Will he himself see his homeland again?

**Read the passage again, out loud if possible.**

What does it teach us about:

- God?
  - Is this a God that you recognise?
  - Is this scenario consistent with your understanding of God?
  - Which divine characteristics are at work here?
  - Do we dare to discern divine love in this passage?
- Ezekiel?
  - Does this sound like the voice of a prophet?
  - What is the extent of his faith?
  - Has his understanding of God been expanded? How?
  - He needs more than simple courage and conviction to deliver this prophecy – what else?
- The exiled People of Israel?
  - Is their complaint “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost: we are cut off completely” a fair complaint?
  - Where else in the OT do they complain in the same way? And how did God deal with them on those occasions?
  - Is this a convincing prophecy for an exiled, enslaved people?
  - Would it convince you, were you in their situation?
- Our current situation?
  - Do you feel “cut off completely”?
  - How real is spiritual dryness?

- What difference to your faith is the closure of our churches making?
- How important is it to you that you share worship and prayer with others, together, in one place? Has that importance been heightened by the temporary loss of that coming together?
- Which is harder to do on your own: to pray or to worship?
- Would you welcome and seek out a shared act of prayer and/or worship, online via Skype or Zoom?

**To review:**

- God speaks to an exiled people who feel cut off from his presence. God promises to re-create their communal life and to return them to their homeland. The vision of the dry bones coming together as living human beings is a motivational metaphor to inspire the prophet's preaching.
- Is your God as big as this?
- Is God going to do the same thing, today, in the midst of the Covid 19 crisis?
- Are you struggling with prayer, and absence?
- This is our God, a God who loves, creates and re-creates, who refreshes all that is dried up with hope and endless possibilities
- That creative, lifegiving Spirit is in every single one of us – Ezekiel encourages us to allow the Spirit to surge again through us, so that we may be truly alive and aware of God's presence with us, wherever we are and whatever is going on

**Prayer**

Life-giving God, renew us by your Spirit, inspire us with your love, give us hope in these dark times and bring us to rest fully in your love. Amen.

Fr Peter 24.3.2020