

DRY BONES ALIVE

Ezekiel 37:1-14

James 4:1-3

A few years ago scientists managed to produce a model of Robert the Bruce's head - did you see it? They took what they had of his skull, and with the help of computers they built up the rest of the bones, in the individual shape which was most likely, and then they covered them with layers of "muscle" and with "skin", and added hair styled to the fashions of the fourteenth century, and there was King Robert, looking out at you. From there it was a simple step for a skilled modeller to make a cast of the head. Suddenly a person from the fairly distant past became more than just a figure in story and legend, he became a real person, one whom you could understand to have had emotion and opinion and life.

We may be amazed when we see such wizardry, but we know, at a basic level, how it is done. We understand that computers and those who operate them can do tremendous things. When Ezekiel had his vision of the dry bones, he had never imagined anything like this! He sees a valley whose floor is covered with a scattering of bones. We may well imagine that these are bones bleached by the desert sun - such a sight would not be uncommon in the Babylonian plains. If you go walking in our hills you may well come upon the occasional sheep bone, or the bones of a bird, and you know that there is nothing as dead as a dry bone. It is difficult to imagine that it was ever part of something alive.

But God asks Ezekiel if the bones can live. You or I might say "No, not now," but Ezekiel is wiser than that. "O Lord God, you know" he answers. He knows perfectly well that he, the prophet, cannot make the bones live but he is not willing to put a limit on the power of God. Wise man.

Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. That doesn't mean he was to tell them the future. In its basic meaning "prophesy" means to speak God's word. So Ezekiel did. He told the bones just what God told him, that God would give them breath and they would live, and that more than that, God would re-clothe them with sinews and skin, and that they would live and know the Lord.

And then the wonder happened - the wonder that is sung in the old spiritual "Dem, bones, dem bones, dem dry bones!" It is a most dramatic piece of illustration, with the bones coming together, each seeking out its necessary neighbour, like pieces of a jigsaw sorting themselves. Then, when the skeletons are complete the muscles formed and the skin grew up and covered them, and then there was a host of lifeless bodies lying in that valley - probably a far more gruesome sight than the bones that had been there before.

Now Ezekiel has the crucial work to do, he has to speak God's word to the breath, the breath that will make this all worthwhile. A pile of lifeless corpses are no use to anyone, but a multitude of living people, that is a different matter. And again, with confidence, Ezekiel speaks, he prophesies. He knows that this is God's will, for God has told him so, and so he declares God's word. And there is a whisper, perhaps, or a rush, or simply a silence, then the bodies breathe, they look around, maybe. They flex stiff muscles and they jump or clamber to their feet.

Now this is a vision. We don't have to worry about what happened to these reconstituted people. We are supposed to learn from it. The people of Israel were supposed to learn that there was life in the nation yet. The exiles must have thought that as a people, as a national entity, they were moribund, if not already defunct. They felt that God had deserted them. For the most part they couldn't imagine living

as God's people unless they were in the promised land, with the temple to be a focus and a guide. But God's will is for them to live, to live and prosper and to return from exile. And, as Ezekiel knew well, when God has willed something, nothing can stand against it. Could these dry bones live? - "Lord God, you know."

There is a phrase which I hear quite a lot in my various meetings these days, a phrase which seems to be much used in the Church of Scotland - even though no one likes it. That phrase is "managing decline". Many of us grass-roots sort of people worry that some of the General Assembly's policies on things like parish reappraisal and the use of buildings, or on recruitment for ministry of various kinds, take the view that the church will be shrinking - in numbers, in finance and in influence.

Maybe that is just the reality. Certainly it has been the reality of recent years. But, so the grass roots say, surely we should not plan to fail. Surely we should be seeking to spread the Kingdom of God, not to manage its decline in our land? It's good and it is heartening to hear such talk, but talk is easy. Reversing policies, planning for growth on a shrinking foundation is not easy. And it is hard to remain positive when, believing the secular press, we continually feed ourselves the line that the church is moribund, the church is shrinking and dying off.

But is the Kirk really dying? Consider this.

Week by week over 600,000 people gather in our churches to worship. This is far more than attend live football matches.

Or think of this

Next May the Church without Walls group in the Kirk are taking the whole of Ingliston to organise a two day event. They have confidently purchased 500 tents so that congregations can rent them, to set up and tell their story to others.

It doesn't sound like a moribund church to me. Or think about this:

Year by year the Kirk is seen to be helping with the brokenness that afflicts our society. It is churches and church people who are at the forefront of work with asylum-seekers, with immigrants, with homelessness, with addiction, with human trafficking, with poverty, with climate change.

People respect the church for that.

There are bad news stories, signs of dying, but there are many signs of life. And if Ezekiel's vision tells us anything, it is that life, life knowing God, is what God intends. And if God intends it, then we should be confident about it. "Can these bones live?" "O Lord God, you know."

And that is the point. It is when we try to manufacture life and liveliness in our own strength that we become discouraged and despondent. It is then that we see not signs of life, but signs of death, because that is not the way to do it. God didn't tell Ezekiel to find clever and careful ways to bring breath to the lifeless bodies. No, God sent the life. Ezekiel simply had to declare God's word, to be confident. If we look around and feel moribund at times, then, like Ezekiel, we should prophecy to God's Spirit. In our prayers we should remind God that life is his will, and that without him we are dead; then we should confidently pray for God's Spirit to come. We know that it is God's will that his people should live and grow and show forth his good news. We don't need to worry that what we ask is not what God wants to give.

"You have not because you ask not" says James. And that is still true. We are very good at analysing our need, but we spend more time and effort wringing our hands and managing decline than praying, asking, prophesying that God give us life, his life, to be lived in his way.

Jesus said "Ask and it will be given you." James tells us we do not have because we do not ask, or maybe, he goes on, we do ask, but for the wrong reasons.

The examples he gives are maybe extreme for today's church, but when we pray for our church, how often are we praying for a restoration of status, rather than thinking of the job of bringing the good news to our parish? Not always, but sometimes.

God's will is not that his church should be a collection of dry bones, nor that we should be an assembly of lifeless bodies. We are not called to be floppy fatalists, but to act with confidence, to stand up, to be an army - a multitude with a purpose, and our purpose is more than existence. The exiles of Israel had the purpose of returning and reclaiming their land. Our task is far greater: it is to reclaim the world, the whole world and this part of it, as God's territory.

We have spent most of the autumn watching and listening to God's prophets of siege and exile - Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We have heard the call to true and radical faithfulness, no matter what the human consequences. We have seen how sometimes God has to take his people out of their comfort zone to remind them of who he is and why they need him. Today is our last visit to these brave, visionary and strangely pertinent prophets. God grant that we have learned holy boldness from watching them at work. God grant that we have learned holy integrity of life and speech, so that our lives match up to what we say, and that we are prepared to live radically different lives to attract the attention of a busy, bamboozled world. God grant that we have learned to be bold in our prayers, bold in our expectation of his work within and among us.

God wants a pure, faithful, proactive, lively people. Let us line ourselves up beside him, in his power, by his Spirit, and watch as the wonder of the good news of Jesus spreads in new ways in the world.