

Ezekiel 37.1-14

Dead or Alive?

Amington St Editha

Pentecost Sunday 20 May 2018

The Sixth Sense

In 1999 a film was released called *The Sixth Sense*. In case you haven't seen it, or have forgotten it, here is the famous scene...]

Show the movie clip.

Bruce Willis plays a child psychologist, helping a little boy who's scared because he can *see dead people*. As he says in the scene, they don't know they're dead – they talk and walk around, only seeing what they want to see.

Believe it or not, the central idea in our reading from Ezekiel this morning is exactly the same.

The Dry Bones

Ezekiel was a prophet to the people of Israel during their exile in Babylon. He is known for dramatic visions and prophecies – and this is one of the most dramatic visions in the entire Bible.

Ezekiel was taken by the Holy Spirit and plonked **in the middle of a valley, full of bones** (1) – **a great many bones** (2).

These were people long-dead, a slain and defeated army of now sun-bleached bones. You can't get deader than this. The valley was Very Dead. I can almost hear the screech of an eagle echoing round the valley.

As he often does, God asks a surprising question: **'Son of man, can these bones live?'** (3).

Well, no they can't, actually. Imagine the look on Ezekiel's face: 'you're having a laugh!' Surely not, Ezekiel thinks. But, he knows the power of God – just look at how he arrived in the valley in the first place. **'Sovereign Lord,'** he says, **'you alone know'** (3). Very diplomatic.

And so God commands Ezekiel: **'Prophecy to these bones,'** he says (4). Ezekiel must have felt like a right wally, calling out God's Word over a valley full of bones – *very dry* bones (2). Yet that is what he does: **I prophesied as I was commanded** (7), he tells us.

Ezekiel paints a good picture, doesn't he? The bones started to **rattle** (7), and after they **came together** (7), **tendons** and **flesh** and **skin covered them** (8).

Until – finally – there was a terrifying, silent army, lying there in the valley, still and lifeless – **there was no breath in them** (8).

So he prophesies again: **‘Prophecy to the breath,’** God says (9). The Hebrew word is *ruach* – ‘prophecy to the *ruach*’ – and it means ‘breath, ‘Spirit’ or ‘wind’. Ezekiel was calling to the Spirit (*ruach*) that hovered over the waters of creation, the same wind (*ruach*) that parted the Red Sea, the same breath (*ruach*) that breathed life into Adam and Eve.

As Ezekiel prophesied, the Spirit (*ruach*) of God blew like a wind (*ruach*), and **breath** (*ruach*) **entered them** – the corpses were no longer dead, but alive: **they stood on their feet – a vast army** (10).

What *incredible* power! God breathed life into an *entire valley* of *Very Dead* bones. Such is the power of the *ruach* of God!

Earlier we sang, ‘O breath of God, come breathe within’. We sang, ‘Come like a rushing wind’, and, ‘Spirit of God, fall in this place’.¹ *This tap Bible* is the Spirit, the breath, the wind we were singing about – the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the Spirit who brought life to an *entire valley* of *Very Dead* bones.

¹ All from *Consuming Fire*, by Tim Hughes.

Pause

But as so often there is a rather shocking punchline to the miracle.

Look with me at verse 11 §:

Then he said to me: ‘Son of man, § these bones are the people of Israel.’

Ezekiel 37.11 (NIV)

We may have thought this miracle was about Judgement Day, when God will bring everyone back to life for judgement.

But no.

The people of Israel were **cut off** from God, without **hope**, exiled to a foreign land (11). Like the people in *The Sixth Sense*, they might have *looked* alive, they might have *thought* they were alive – but the wise ones knew they were as spiritually dead as a valley of Very Dry bones.

And the same is true for us: we might *look* alive, we might even *think* we are alive, but without the *ruach* of God – without his breath, his wind, his Spirit – we are as good as dead.

We might put it like this §: **a steering wheel don’t mean you can drive, a warm body don’t mean I’m alive** (Switchfoot, *Vice Verses*).

Alive... or dead?

So what *does* it mean to be alive? The Bible's answer is quite clear – we need the *ruach* of God: his Spirit, his *breath*, the wind that rushed into the upper room where the disciples were meeting:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Acts 2.2 (NIV)

And with that, the disciples were completely transformed – from a huddle of frightened fishermen, to powerful preachers, full of faith and courage. After the Holy Spirit came, they got up, went outside, Peter preached, the number of believers grew from 120 to 3,000, and the church was born. A valley of dry bones to an army.

The church was born, but the coming of the Spirit was not a one-off, a special event for a special day. The Spirit was given, to bring about the birth of the church, **and to keep it alive.**

The Holy Spirit continued to work in and through the early church, and he continues to work in and through the church today spreading the good news about Jesus, healing the sick, converting even violent enemies, changing hearts and minds and lives.

And it's like that with individual believers, too.

The Holy Spirit is God's gift to *all* Christians – young or old, big or small. That's because, without the Holy Spirit we *cannot* have faith. All human beings are broken by sin and evil – so God gives the Holy Spirit to start the work of repairing our lives.

And that work begins with faith.

Some of you may have heard Ray say that we shouldn't invite the God to come, *because he's already here*. And he's absolutely right! Instead of praying, 'Father, please be with us,' we should pray, 'Father, *thank you that you are with us*.'

In the same way, there is no need for a Christian to pray for God to give them the Holy Spirit – *because he has already given it to us*. Christians don't need to pray, § 'Come, Holy Spirit' – *because he's already here*. § The same Spirit is given to *all* believers.

If you aren't a Christian but would like to be, in a few moments there will be an opportunity for you to ask God to give you his Holy Spirit, like he did to the first believers on the day of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit fill us, he opens our eyes to see God, and our hearts to receive God – he gives us *faith*.

But if you *are* a Christian, how should you pray?

First, Paul says **]** **keep in step with the Spirit** (Galatians 5.25). Think of it like this: it's a bit like a three-legged race. Have you ever tried one? Two people stand next to each other and their middle legs are tied together. What happens if you try to walk at your own pace? You fall over, pretty much immediately. But if you **keep in step** with each other, you begin to walk, slowly at first, but getting faster, and then as you get used to it you begin to run.

All Christians *have* the Spirit, the breath of God within them, but sometimes we find it difficult to 'walk the talk' of our faith, as Sue said last week. If we ignore God, if we ignore his commands, if we try to live life our own way, instead of his way, we'll stumble – like two people trying to walk their own way in a three-legged race.

Perhaps you identify with that this morning, in which case there will be an opportunity to pray about that with others.

The second thing Paul say is **]** **be filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5.18). Here he's talking to Christians, who already *have* the Spirit – so what's he on about? The first clue is in the word he uses which doesn't mean 'be filled once' with the Spirit, but 'be filled every day' with the Spirit, 'go on being filled' with the Spirit. This isn't a prayer we Christians need to say once, but *every day*: 'Father, please fill me with your Spirit'.

Second, think of it like this: it's a bit like a glass of water. *Get out a glass and pour a little water into it from a jug.* This glass has water in it – exactly like a Christian has the Holy Spirit. So, Paul's prayer isn't to ask God to give us something that isn't already there, but to give *more* of what is *already* there *start pouring...* – more... and more... *keep pouring...* and more... *keep pouring so the glass overflows...* until we are *overflowing* with the Holy Spirit.

Friends, these are my three prayers this morning:

- If you've never made the step of faith, this is a great day to pray God would give you his Holy Spirit.
- If you aren't walking the talk of your faith, if you feel like you are stumbling in your faith, pray God would help you learn to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.
- If you feel like you're running on empty, if you feel like you are going through the motions as a Christian, or you want to be filled in a fresh way, pray that God would fill – *and go on filling* – you with the Holy Spirit.

Friends, God *wants* to give you his Holy Spirit.

Jesus himself said:

'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Luke 11.13 (NIV)

Prayer

Pause. Invite the prayer team to go to their stations.

For the rest of our service this morning we'll be focusing on prayer.

We have a prayer wall, which we started on Wednesday at the TCC prayer service. There are some 'bricks' – if you'd like to come and write a prayer on a brick and stick it to the wall, please do so.

We have prayer request slips, which you were given as you came in – and there are more at the back. If you'd like to submit a prayer request, for yourself or for a loved one, please fill those in – they will be collected up during our last song.

For the next few minutes we will be focusing on opening ourselves up to the Holy Spirit. Please sit quietly and comfortably, as we focus on God, who wants to pour out his Spirit on us.

If you want, at any stage, to pray with people from our Wholeness and Healing team, please make your way to one of the prayer stations at the front.

Jesus himself said:

‘If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Luke 11.13 (NIV)

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence with us, here, today. We thank you that you love us and long to give us your Holy Spirit.

§ – *no entry sign*. Maybe this picture describes your attitude to the Holy Spirit, to God working in your life. Maybe you like the way you are, you don’t want to change. But the Holy Spirit is a *good* gift, lavished on us by a good, good Father, who loves us and wants us to be the women and men he made us to be.

If this is you, close your mind and picture yourself taking down the ‘no entry’ signs, and opening your heart to let God in. Pray, ‘Holy Spirit, you are welcome here’.

Remind people about the prayer stations and the prayer wall.

§ – *clenched fists*. Maybe you feel more like this picture – with clenched fists, you are holding onto to past hurt or anger, failure or bitterness. But, it is impossible to receive a gift with clenched fists – instead, we need to open our hands to receive a gift.

If you can, ball up, clench your fists as tightly as you can. If you can't, keep your eyes closed and picture it. *Pause*. Now, slowly – very slowly, release the pressure, and open your hands. Slowly – as slowly as possible – don't rush.

Pause.

§ Now sit quietly with your palms facing up, and pray silently, 'Heavenly Father, I am ready to receive your love, your life, your Spirit'. Pray it, slowly, a few times.

Remind people about the prayer stations and the prayer wall.

§ – *three-legged race*. Perhaps the picture of the three-legged race resonated with you. In the picture on the screen, some of them are about to fall over, some of them are clearly not walking in step with each other – but one or two are making some progress.

Are you keeping in step with the Spirit, or are you trying to walk your own way?

Think about your daily life, how you are at work, with friends, with family, going about your life – do you walk in step with the Spirit, or do you largely ignore him?

Close your eyes and picture yourself in a three legged race. You begin by taking small steps, learning to move at the same time as the person your leg is tied to – and then, slowly, as you move, you get used to it and can start moving more quickly.

Pray that God would teach you to talk at *his* pace, to keep in step with *him*, not trying to walk your own way.

Remind people about the prayer stations and the prayer wall.

¶ – *overflowing glass*. The final picture is of a glass, filled and overflowing with water. When Christians ask God to fill them with the Holy Spirit, they aren't asked for something they don't have, but *more* of what they *already* have.

Keep your palms up, close your eyes and picture the glass being filled to overflowing with water – a never-ending stream of pure, cleansing, and refreshing water. Ask God to fill you and to *go on filling you* with his Holy Spirit.

You don't have to be on the prayer team to pray for each other, however. ¶ Ask the person sitting next to you if they would like you to pray for them – simply put a hand on their shoulder, and pray the prayer on the screen.

It may be that God has laid on your heart something else to pray for. Please take this opportunity to pray together – with the person next to you, or come forward to write your prayer on one of the bricks for our prayer wall.

In a few moments we will pray together the Lord's Prayer.