

THE HOMECOMING EZEKIEL 37:1-14

What words would you use to describe the Church of 2008 in Scotland? Is that a silly question? What words would you use to describe our congregation? Think about it for a moment and then ask yourself 'How many of these words would be a compliment to the Church? How many words would be critical of the Church?' Being honest, we would need to have both sets. What is good about Church? We talked about this in our evening service last Sunday and actually came up with quite a list of things that people liked about Church and said was good. But then we asked 'what exasperates you about Church?' and came up with another list.

I said some 2 months ago when we started this little series of sermons on Ezekiel that some people have written about the Church today as being in something of the same kind of situation as Israel was in the time Ezekiel lived and preached. Israel was living in exile, away from home, sitting by the river Euphrates in Babylon (Iraq), weeping because they had lost everything they loved. They were away from home, away from the temple, away from worship, away (they thought) from God. So they lived in an almost permanent spirit of despair; the future was so bleak that they saw nothing good and they sat and wept. But right at the start we said that God was still there in plains of Iraq; God was judging His people for their mistakes and faults, but God was still at work. The Church is going through changes: it has lost its influence in our society; it is increasingly pushed to the margins of society and seen as no longer relevant to many people's lives; so we sometimes think that the Church has a bleak future and is about to die.

Today we come to the picture that changes everything for Ezekiel. He comes with a new message, a message of hope. There are good things just around corner for Israel. There are things for us to learn too, about the Church for the future; the future for the Church is not bleak and grim; God has not gone away; He is still here, He is still at work.

This is Hannah Jones; she has been in news this week because she refused to have a heart transplant operation. She is 13 and at age of 4 was diagnosed with a rare form of leukaemia and has been in hospital many times since. She decided that she didn't want this operation because she had enough and even if it means she will die, she said 'no' to the heart transplant. Her decision has caused something of a debate because the hospital had gone to court to try to force her to have the transplant. What was in her best interests? In the end, the courts decided that she had ability to choose.

On December 3, 1967, a South African surgeon Christiaan Barnard conducted the first heart transplant on 53-year-old Lewis Washkansky. In the 40 years since then, this has become a common-place operation, that new hearts are given to people in extreme need. People are given a new lease of life by this technology. I have a friend whose son was born with a heart defect and he could do very little, couldn't play with his big bother, he couldn't play any kind of sport, most of the time he was very sick; eventually, he was given a heart transplant in Newcastle and it changed his life; he became a new person; all the things he couldn't do before he can now do; his life was transformed by being given a new heart.

God says to His people thru Ezekiel: "*I will...*" (36:26) This comes in chapter 36, before the piece we read earlier and is in the midst of a whole lot of promises that God makes. Over and over again He says 'I will', 10 times altogether. These promises are all about making Israel a new nation, a people whom God will bless all

over again. The key to this is this promise of a new heart. There is a heart to remove, a heart of stone, that is dead, unresponsive, and belonging to a people who have ignored God and not listened and gone their own way and not prayed and not obeyed. In its place there will be a new heart, a heart of flesh, a beating heart, a heart that is alive, belonging to a people who will listen for God's word, who will pray and obey and be the kind of people that God wants. God will change His people, He will make them a new people and He will take them back home to be a new nation again and live at peace.

Why does God do this? *"It is not..."* (36:22) When Israel was in exile, other people laughed at her; they laughed at God as well – 'Is your God not able to rescue you?' - and so God's reputation was brought down by the people's shame. When the Church is in the doldrums in our society the same thing happens; people laugh at the Church when it makes a fool of itself or when it closes down; when that happens, God's reputation is diminished a little bit more too. But God takes being God very seriously indeed and the only way to enhance His reputation in the world is to bless His people, is to return them home, is to make them prosper all over again. It is not just for their sake that He does this, but for His own reputation. So God has not finished with us, with His Church just yet; His reputation depends on it!

Ezekiel is in a valley and as many times before he is given a vision. The valley full of bones, that are dead and dry. This is a picture of Israel as they were, a people who felt hopeless, dead, dry, and empty. God asks Ezekiel *"Son of man..."* (37:3) He gives a wise answer! Ezekiel is to do 2 things: 1) *"Prophesy..."* (37:4) He was to tell them the word of Lord and *"As I..."* (37:7f) But the bones were still dead bones; they were joined together, but still dead. 2) *"Prophesy to..."* (37:9) The word for 'breath' can mean breath, or wind, and can also mean 'spirit' and perhaps it means all of these here. Ezekiel is praying; he is praying that the Spirit of God will come into these people and make them come alive. That is what happens: *"So I..."* (37:10) What had started as a valley of dry, dead bones, is now a living army of people. They have come alive again.

People who were once lost in their despair have come alive with a new sense of hope in their hearts. People who were lost in exile and weeping by the river Euphrates will be going home to Jerusalem and will worship God again there. People who thought that God had gone away and left them in judgement now see that God is still there and is still at work to bless them and so they will rejoice in the goodness of God. God is still at work in His Church; the Church in Scotland is not yet dead; don't write its obituary just yet. The Church of the future will be quite different from the Church of 2008 in ways that I don't yet know, but change it must. But it is not yet dead; God is still at work, we are still His people. He is not finished with us yet. Any despair that you feel about the Church can be overcome; there are signs of hope and there is life and God is at work.

There are very simple 2 strategies that we can learn from Ezekiel:

1) take the bible seriously – that comes in 2 ways in these words that we're thinking about today. We see it first in the new heart that God gives: it is a heart that listens for God's word and puts into practice what God teaches, a responsive and open heart. The second way is in the way God brings dry bones back to life - *"hear the word of the Lord"* (v4) This new heart will listen for and hear God's word to His people so that the people can live life in the way God teaches. So we need to take the Bible seriously. What does that mean? It means listening to the sermons preached on a Sunday morning and evening; it means reading the bible for yourself at home and if want to know how I can help you with that. It also means taking opportunities to study the bible together and learn from it in small groups; we have 2

of these and together there are 12 people involved; there is a challenge to others there! In whichever way we do it, in Church, at home, in groups, the challenge is to take the Bible seriously enough to live by the principles it teaches – love God, love others are the two big ones and we could almost say that the rest of the Bible is about what these two big commands mean. Take the bible seriously enough to read it; take the bible seriously enough to put it into practice in your daily life.

2)pray – but there was another strategy – to pray. “*Come from...*” (v9) Ezekiel is praying that God’s Spirit will come to breathe new life into these people. God answers his prayers and the Spirit comes and people come alive. No mission strategy will breathe new life into the Church in lasting way; only the Spirit of God at work will breathe new life into our hearts. Only the Spirit will create in us a desire to read the bible and live it out; it is the Spirit who creates the desire in people’s hearts to know more about Jesus; it is the Spirit who creates the desire in people’s hearts to believe in and follow Jesus. So we need to pray for the Spirit of God to be at work in us and in our community and in people we know, to create these desires, that the hearts in us will not be hard, stone hearts, unresponsive, not listening, but will be beating hearts, alive hearts, hearts of flesh, ready and willing to know and love God. Pray that for ourselves and for others.

We need to take both of these seriously. It is easy for the Kirk Session to make a decision that there should be Bible study in the congregation; it is easy to make the decision to start a prayer group or other avenues for prayer. We have ticked the box; this is what Churches are supposed to do. But the challenge does not end there. What will we do with these groups? What will we do with these opportunities? Will we take them seriously or will we leave them to others? Will we be willing to take the Bible seriously to listen and take it to heart when it is preached, to read it for ourselves, to join one of our groups? Will we take prayer seriously enough to try praying, or to use the prayer diary or to be part of the e-mail prayer chain, or to come to Outlook on Tuesday? There used to be rule in rugby that the side with the ball had to ‘use it or lose it’. We have this opportunity now; it may not always be case.

God will breathe new life into His Church. I have no doubt about that. God is not finished with His Church yet; His reputation depends on that! Reports of the death of Church are greatly exaggerated. His new life strategy for the Church is simple: take the bible seriously and pray. As we do these two things, something wonderful happens – a stone heart begins to beat again with life; a people once dead and unresponsive comes alive, ready to listen to God, ready to live for God in world, ready to love God and love others. A valley of dry bones came alive as the prophet said “*hear the word of the Lord*” and “*come Spirit come.*” The Bible and prayer have always been two priorities of my ministry; it is a constant challenge to keep that focus. Let us be like that together!