

Sermon Archive 286

Sunday 29 March, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Those poor old bones. They can't breathe, because they have no breath - some kind of metaphorical respiratory catastrophe. And they can't move about, because they have no sinew - they're stuck where they are, in their valley. And their sound is silence - as if the passing of ideas and conversation and transactions and commerce are all things of the past. It's a grim situation - for which there may be current parallels. The big question posed by the God of all this is: can they live? Ezekiel says "I don't know". Well, do you know? The recurring refrain from the prophet is "O Lord God, you know".

God knows.

Within the conversation between Ezekiel and the god, there are four things happening. An assumption; a question; an instruction, and then some sounds. And so an "I don't know" sermon of four little parts.

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The assumption. Before the first words go forth, Ezekiel sees the scene. And you know, when we see things, we assess them. **This** situation is good; **this** situation is bad; this one's **hopeless**. Ezekiel's not speaking to his God yet, but he's describing (some sort of inner-monologue to himself) what he's seeing - and it's not good. The world has become a valley, (high sides, kind of hemmed in), full of bones that used to be people. What are their chances? Well, who knows; but the bones are really dry. So the assumption, not yet articulated, but already pretty obvious, is that it's all over.

Here's a question: when we assume endings, things that say "no" to hope, are we working out of reality, or fear? I can tell you that at various times, when I've declared something over, something that no longer is alive, it's been a fair call. I've rightly realised, for instance, way after a relationship had ended, that it **had**. A sense of denial had stopped me realising it, made me to deny a reality that everyone else had seen ages before - and some friends who gently had tried to tell me. Finally,

when you realise that it's over, it's a victory for reality. It's not so much an assumption, as a revelation - but that's only because I refused to see. So sometimes, when it's over, it's over.

There have been other times, though, when I've assumed that something is over - but it hasn't been. I've made my assumption because I've been depressed, or I've forgotten something important. Some little spark of hope, or life, or love - that I've been too frightened to hope might be. Fear puts you into panic mode, and not much comes out of panic but bad decisions and confusion.

As Ezekiel looks at what his world has become, he's admitting to himself that the bones are pretty dry. The questions hasn't yet been asked of him "can they live", but he's all ready assessing. The assumption has to be that no, there is no life possible. It's all over. But is he basing that on reality, or on fear? I don't know. Do you know? I wonder if God knows. Here ends the first part.

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The second part is the question. The God once worshipped by the bones, when they had been living people, puts a question to the sole survivor of the time of no breath. The question isn't a surprise really, because Ezekiel's already been in reflective mode, and pretty much answered it already - well answered it within the confines of his thoughts or fears. The god asks "can they live".

Perhaps there's something in being asked a question by a god, that makes a prophet answer more gently. If he's thinking to himself "it's all over", he doesn't say that, maybe feels he can't say that, to God. Does he feel, now that God is speaking, even in questions - now that the only sound isn't silence in the valley - that he has to admit a possibility - an outside chance? I don't know. Do you know? Ezekiel, respectfully says that he imagines God knows.

Is this a case where "God knows" is actually just another way of saying "I don't think so"? I don't know; do you?

But within this conversation, and what comes from it, a key ignition point for something coming to life, is the well placed, sometimes courageous, question. Ask the question to prick the boil of what everyone is privately thinking. Who do they say I am? What do you want me to do for you? Where are the other nine who were healed? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? My God, why have you forsaken me? All good questions - God forms good questions. Are the bones able to live? There may be power in saying "I don't know. Do you?"

Here ends the second part.

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The third part is the instruction. On the surface it's a stupid one. God instructs the prophet to speak to the bones. No point in that, is there? Or is there . . . I guess it depends on whether the first assumption (that it's all over) came from reality or fear. Has too much come from depression, has something important been forgotten? I don't know. The bones look pretty dry. But God asks Ezekiel to speak to the bones anyway - to speak to them of life, of hope, of faith. Tall order for grim creatures who might first want to work on breath and sinews. And indeed, that first work, first gift, is where Ezekiel begins. He speaks of the giving of the most basic gift - breath, life - and then of the growing of sinews, then flesh, then skin - it's a gradual giving of gifts so they might be people again, not corpses.

When the world is a valley in which the dead are trapped, the prophet is called to speak of breath, and sinew, and skin - you shall live, and know that I am the Lord.

Does it make sense to speak like this? Will people laugh? Does it matter if they do? (Actually they can't laugh - the dead have no breath. Wouldn't it be great if one day they could laugh again - joy laughing, gratitude laughing, the bones becomes laughers and dancers - and know that I am the Lord. Does God have a people to speak such speech? I don't know. Do you? Ultimately, God knows.

And that's part three.

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Part Four is about some sounds that the prophet then hears - and describes. Having spoken hope and life to the bones, he begins to hear a rattling. It's the sound of the bones coming together. It's the sound, in a world of death, of life returning - of the initial stirrings of the life-giving work of God. "Talk about it", says God. When the life begins to stir, when the Spirit enables breath to move, tell the whole nation about it. Call them to see, amid the death, the gift of life.

Here are a few thoughts about going into lock down. We've all gone our separate ways, so we don't become dry bones with no breath in us. It's the right thing to do, but it feels a bit like a valley. Within that valley, we speak not from fear, but from grace and hope. And what we say is "this isn't over". There is life. And then we start listening - as it were - for the sounds of life.

As I packed up my work stuff, and a few church objects, to take into my isolation, Jane was taking her essential office things out of the office, and Daniel was there to teach me a few video techniques for these youtube services. As we said goodbye to one another, I felt a tremendous gratitude for this community to which I belong. As I tell you that, is that one of the sounds of life.

Also on the day of the great decampment, I got an email from a Knox person. Attached to it was a photo she'd taken of a butterfly in her garden. I imagined the butterfly, free from any responsibility to contain itself, flying from her garden to mine. It probably didn't - but the idea of it doing so had a kind of power of connection - and beauty. As I tell you that, is that one of the sounds of life?

Also on that day, I found my neighbours from the front house, two young men who live with support from some their parents and some care-givers, packing up for the duration, and returning to their parents' homes. There's a cat, who, for good practical reasons, can't be relocated, so it's staying behind, next door to my house. I don't like the cat. It's killed birds in my garden and made howling, fighting noises at night. I may yet end up going to the house next door each day to feed that cat. I will put jelly-meat into the bowl of an animal I dislike. Will it thank me? The answer is "no". But when two creatures come together, such that one of them can continue to live, and the other can be softened, is that not one of the sounds of life? People might call it service, charity, mercy, caring. It feels to me, in a time of death, pretty much like a sound of life.

Into your isolation, through this broadcast service, I dare to speak to you of life. I dare also to say that within your bubble there will be sounds of life. It's not all over - the bones are rattling.

Maybe we'll hear them, if we keep together a moment of quiet.

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