

Breath of new life

Looking back, I've lead or preached at Sunday worship and sixteen churches. Sadly, four of those churches have now closed. Another two of them have amalgamated into one congregation.

Time and time again churches have discussions about declining numbers and income, increased administrative burdens and costs.

Is it all hopeless? Because sometimes it feels like it might be.

The prophet Ezekiel was given a vision of a valley full of dry bones. It was a scene of desolation and death. The bones are a gruesome image, and a grim reminder of defeat. These bones represent the nation of Israel, carried off to Babylon in captivity.

The bones are scattered in the valley. No funeral. No burial. No headstones. Just scattered bones.

The army is left on the battlefield where it had been defeated, and the bones are bleached in the sun. They are lifeless, dry bones.

God leads Ezekiel around the valley and so he can have a good look. God then asks the prophet, "Can these bones live?"

Based on what we know about how things work, the answer should be 'no'. They're dead. The bones are dry and they're scattered. CPR is not going to work. A defibrillator isn't going to make a difference. I get the impression that you couldn't even identify individual bodies.

But Ezekiel, knowing that nothing is impossible for God answers, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

God knows. And God has the power to bring life to those bones.

And God tells Ezekiel to "prophesy" to the bones. People commonly think of 'prophesying' as predicting the future, but really, to 'prophesy' is simply to speak God's word. The work of a prophet isn't so much as to tell future, as to tell people what God has to say.

God tells Ezekiel to speak God's word to these dry bones. And Ezekiel does, which if you think about it, is a really weird thing to do. Today, we often despair at sharing the good

news of Jesus with people who aren't interested, but this is another level of crazy, because Ezekiel begins speaking to people who are dead.

And in that desolate valley, Ezekiel gets a response.

The bones lament, they cry out, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." (verse 11)

They've been separated from God, and now, through Ezekiel, God reaches out to them.

Just like God reaches out to each one of us. Even when there's nothing that we can do, there's something God can do – in fact that God has already done.

Paul tells us that apart from God we are spiritually "dead through the trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1-2). We're not merely sick or disabled by our sins, but dead. Only God can raise the dead. Paul assures us that, "when you were dead in trespasses ..., God made you alive together with [Christ], when he forgave us all our trespasses" (Col 2:13). On the cross, Jesus took on our sins and died in our place, taking our punishment.

Even as Ezekiel prophesied in that valley, "there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone." (v7)

And then, in verse 8, as Ezekiel looked at the reassembled skeletons, suddenly tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them. (37:8)

There wasn't life in them, yet... but it seems a whole lot more possible now.

And God continues to work through Ezekiel, saying to him "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.'" (37:9)

And again, Ezekiel prophesies as God commanded and we read in verse 10 that "and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army."

Through the power of God, the impossible had been achieved: the valley of the dry bones was alive with the people of Israel.

The fact that the bodies were restored and then the breath of life came to them echoes the story of the creation of Adam we have in Genesis 2:7 "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

In that valley of death, God brings life. In a time of hopelessness, God brings hope.

Sometimes, things do feel hopeless, for all of us. We are often overwhelmed by the problems of our lives and the world.

We get despair, don't we? Here we are, privileged to live in some of the nicest places in one of the best cities in one of the best countries in the world. But despair gets to us all, sometimes.

But no matter how dire our situation, no matter how miserable we may feel, we need to remember that there is hope. But we need to have our hope in the right thing – and not in the stockmarket or superannuation or life insurance or family or even community, but hope in Jesus. And not just hope that Jesus will save us, but trust that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has saved us.

Like those dry bones in the valley, we can't raise ourselves. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. God takes the initiative; God doesn't wait for us to seek him, but God reaches out to us.

People want God to change their circumstances, to gain good health, to be financially prosperous and secure – but often it's so they don't have to change themselves. People complain and say things like: "I'll be content if...", or "I'll be happy when...." or "if I can just get through this, I'll be alright".

But part of our response to God is to change ourselves.

Before Ezekiel's eyes, the dry bones of that valley become a vast and living multitude, and the message to defeated and captive Israel was clear: God would revive them. They would become a people restored. Even though they were torn from the promised land and spiritually dead, they would live again and return to the land that God had given them.

Sure enough, we read in the scriptures that a remnant did return and rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and the city wall, but Ezekiel's vision of physical resurrection pointed to an even greater resurrection to come – a spiritual one.

Ezekiel's message was a message of hope to the hopeless. Even of life to the lifeless.

In the previous chapter the prophet writes that God says, "On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the

desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden;” (36:33-35a)

It brings to mind images of our own country in the aftermath of bushfires. Great swathes of land destroyed and blackened. We look at the ashes and the charred remains, and wonder how anything could live there again.

But not long after the devastation there are always shoots of green appearing in the blackness of the bush.

And today we look around at the world and wonder how anything will ever be better again.

Ezekiel’s vision is certainly a strange one. Prophecy to dry and scattered bones. A few years ago, I taught school scripture – three year five classes at three different local schools, and it felt like my words were falling on the deaf ears – I guess it felt like I was preaching to dry bones.

In the world’s terms it was a crazy thing to do. But with God, all things are possible: it wasn’t Ezekiel’s words that brought the bones together, it was the power of God. It wasn’t Ezekiel’s prophecy that put life in those bodies, it was the breath – the Spirit – of God.

Our world today might feel to us like a valley of dry bones. A place of death and hopelessness.

But there is hope, and the world, even if it seems beyond saving, can be saved through the power of God’s spirit.

But the lessons for us from Ezekiel’s vision can be much more personal, too.

The organised church in Australia has been in decline for quite some time. Congregations have become more inwardly focused as pressures of membership and finances have mounted. And while there are exceptions to that, it is the general trend. I remember reading a comment, at the start of the pandemic, that COVID-19 could spell the end of organised religion, and while it didn’t – it did put a dent in church attendance.

Might our church – and by that I mean the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and I mean the Uniting Church in Australia, and I also mean the congregation of St Ives Uniting Church, be like the valley of dry bones that Ezekiel saw?

Our church isn't a business, and although for good reasons we do look at many aspects of our church life in a business-like way, we shouldn't judge it like a business. The power of the church, the life of the church, doesn't come from us – although we do get to be part of it – it comes from God.

The dry bones of the valley didn't join themselves together. They bodies didn't breathe new life into each other. It was all done by God's power and God's spirit.

And even more personal, still: Our lives can easily become valleys of dry bones. Lives which become preoccupied with all the things of the world, lives which are lived apart of God, lives which are preoccupied with accumulating wealth and building security, lives which are spent judging others and blaming others, lives which are spent pushing others down so we can raise ourselves up.

But God has the power to change that, God has the power to bring life to a valley of dead bones, God has the power to bring new life into a land devastated by bushfire, God has the power to breathe new life into his church, and God has the power to raise each one of us up, and empower each one us as his child and a member of his kingdom.

We need God's breath in our lives. At the moment, sometimes it does seem like we live day to day in a valley of dry bones with death and despair all around.

But remember that God can, and God will, if we open our hearts to him, breathe new life into each one of us, into his church, and into his world, today and always.

Amen.