

“I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” (Ezekiel 37 v7)

Go on - admit it – whenever you read the story of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones, you all start singing under your breath.....

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones

*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
Oh, hear the word of the Lord.*



We all learned the song as children – someone describes the song as a child’s first anatomy lesson:



*The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the back bone,
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!*

But actually, like most Spirituals, this song was written and sung at a time of suffering, to bring together a downtrodden people and give them hope for the future. The song was written in the 1920s by the great African-American author and songwriter James Weldon Johnson using the Old Testament story of the Valley of the Dry Bones to motivate and give hope to black Americans at a time of terrible racial discrimination.

And the story on which it is based – our reading from Ezekiel today – itself speaks into an ancient time of crisis – the Israelites are refugees in exile – they see no hope for the future – they feel abandoned by their God. They bewail the present and fear the future.

And in a vision, Ezekiel is taken to a valley of dry bones, and God says to him: “Mortal – can these dry bones live?” And Ezekiel answers: “O Lord God, you know”.

But God passes the responsibility back to Ezekiel – “Prophecy – tell them what love can and will do to bring them back to life.” Ezekiel does it, and the bones come together, but still there is no breath (spirit) in them. God says “Prophecy to the breath – come and breathe on these slain that they may live.” Ezekiel does, and the bones “stand on their feet”. They rise up into life.

At a time of fear and anxiety and loss, God speaks to his people who have been saying that their bones are dried up and their hope is lost...

“I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live”.

So the story and the song were written for people who were in a really bad place – like a valley of dry bones – people who felt they had no control over their lives any more, who were afraid and anxious about what the future might hold, who needed a sign of hope.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus travels to Bethany, to the house of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. He had been to their home before, and clearly had always found it a place of sanctuary and welcome. But now, Lazarus is dead and Jesus knows it will have become a place of desolation and anxiety. For Mary and Martha, the sorrow of losing their beloved brother is compounded by anxiety about their own future, in a society where women’s security comes only from close male relatives. They bewail the present, and fear the future.

And for Jesus, going to this place of recent death also highlights the inevitability of his own imminent death – indeed his disciples warn him not to go to Judea because it will be so dangerous for him, but he is adamant, and they decide to risk everything to go with him. As Thomas says “*Let us go too and die with him*”.

When Jesus arrives near the tomb, we read that he is “disturbed in Spirit” – in some translations he “groaned” or “trembled” – he is confronting death – the death of his friend, but also his own death soon to come. And that same word will be used again later in John’s account of the crucifixion to describe the disciples’ feelings in their confusion over Jesus death.

And we too need to make the link between this tomb where Lazarus lies, and that tomb in the Garden where Jesus is to be laid such a short time later.

As Jesus stands near Lazarus’ tomb, he asks “Where have you laid him?” and we remember the same words spoken by Mary Magdalene by the empty tomb early on Easter morning - that day of Resurrection.

Here in Bethany, Jesus tells Martha – “*I am the Resurrection*” – this word ‘*anastasis*’ can mean both *rising up* and *raising up*. Here Jesus raises up Lazarus, and in a short while he himself will rise up from the dead.

And so here we have two stories, both set in a place of desolation and fear and anxiety, where people bewail the present suffering, and fear for the future. God speaks into both situations with a message of new life, as he gives Ezekiel the vision of dry bones rising to new life, and as Jesus tells Martha “I am the Resurrection” and assures new life for her brother, Lazarus.

We are in such a time now – people everywhere bewail the terrible situation we find ourselves in, not just here but throughout the world, and we all fear for the future – what will life be like when

this is all over? But the promise is there – the power of Love is stronger than death, and new life is assured.

God speaks to us too – “Prophecy – tell them what Love can and will do to bring them back to life.” We have the message of hope to bring to a suffering world, that out of tragedy can come new life, if we love and care for one another in every way we can. Big things, like the selfless work of our health care professionals and supermarket workers, but also small things – even just a phone call to someone who is alone and frightened – will make the difference.

And Jesus assures us as he did Martha – “I am the Resurrection” and over the next two difficult weeks we will follow his journey to the Cross, the Tomb and to the New Life of Easter.

And so we pray:

Lord, we are all anxious about what we see and hear is happening in our world. We are confused about how to keep ourselves and others safe, and fearful about what the future holds. Help us to trust in the power of Love to sustain and heal, and bring hope and new life into our lives.

We pray for all who are sick, in body or mind, and give thanks for the skill and dedication of all who care for them.

We pray for all who mourn – especially those who were not able to be with their loved ones before or at the hour of their death. Bring them peace of mind.

We remember those who have died, and give thanks for the assurance that they rest now in the peace and light of your everlasting Love.

Jesus said “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” (John 11 v25)