

Can Those Dry Bones Live?

We've all seen visions on the news of refugee camps in the Sudan where thousands of people await food. We've seen the taunt bodies of babies, their distended bellies, malnourished and starving. This morning the young people will be collecting the Love Loaves and the money will be used to help the hungry. We hope that the little bit we do here will keep some baby alive; will put flesh back on a mother's protruding bones; will help keep a refugee camp from becoming a literal valley of dry bones.

Ezekiel had a vision of a refugee camp in a valley where no love loaves were sent. No food came. Men, women, and children starved to death. Nothing was left but dry bones. The bones represented the Israelites in Babylon. Babylon conquered Israel in 587 BC. Their temple was destroyed. Jewish captives were taken back to Babylonian refugee camps. Israel felt cut off from the source of their spiritual life. They had been in those refugee camps for more than ten years now, and what glimmerings of hope they had when first they arrived had now been altogether extinguished. Their hope was lost. Israel was dead. Starved to death *spiritually*. They said, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

I know many of you feel dry and dead spiritually. You've told me. You feel cut off from Christ, the source of our spiritual nourishment. You feel malnourished. You feel like your starving spiritually. Some feel like you have already died spiritually. You've told me that love for God and others has grown cold and perfunctory. Some wonder if you even believe in God anymore. For others faith has become a dull habit and duty. *You give your money*, you say, but not your hearts to Christ. You find that you prefer religious entertainment to *Worship*. *Bible study* is non-existent. The *doctrines* of the church seem cold and lifeless, unrelated to life.

Prayer and disciplined obedience to Christ's commands are lacking. You joined the church of Christ to get rid of your sins but you discover that you've brought with you your unrepented prides and prejudices. You feel that there is little sense among us of belonging to and caring for one another. You say you've lost your appetite for God. There is little desire to feed upon Christ as he is offered to us in the preached *Word* and in the *Sacrament* of Holy Communion.

The big question is "Can these bones live?" Can we fill the stone and wood skeleton of this old church once again with worshippers eager to praise God? *Proud presumption answers with a loud, confident, "Yes!"* We'll get enthusiastic song leaders and learn happy choruses. We'll clap our hands. We'll bring in dramatic preachers who give altar calls. We'll smile and make a point to greet visitors. We'll visit our members. We'll draw up mission statements, objectives, goals and action plans. We'll think positive thoughts. We'll read Robert Schuller and Norman Vincent Peale. We'll make this place come alive. Yes, I know these bones can live again. That is the voice of proud presumption.

Despair, on the other hand, looks at the bones and says, "No!" It's impossible. There's no hope. There's nothing we can do. We're not just sick. We're terminally ill. We're dead! We're dry! We're cold! There's no life at all in us. God is finished with us. We're hopelessly dead in our traditions and rituals and cold orthodoxy. We'll *never* change. Despair leads us to say, "No! These bones will never live again."

Presumption says, "Yes!" Despair says, "No!" But faith says, "O Sovereign Lord. You alone know." There's no presumption in that answer. Humanly speaking we don't see how we could ever come alive. But we know who asks us if these bones can live. It's the Sovereign Lord who raised Jesus from the dead. It's the mighty God who sent down his Holy

Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. That gives us hope. We realize that if these dry bones live again it won't be because we've found a clever way to raise the dead. It will happen only through the Word and Spirit of the Sovereign Lord.

That's what Ezekiel discovered. The Lord said to Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones." In the bible, prophecy is not primarily predicting the future. That's the popular understanding of the word today. But the Biblical meaning of the word *prophecy* is "to speak God's Word". Prophecy is primarily speaking a present Word of God to his people. So Ezekiel prophesied, "Dry Bones! Hear the Word of the Lord!" How ridiculous it all seems. How can bones hear? Ezekiel realised that. He oftened felt God had called him to exhort lifeless people to listen.

But Ezekiel preached anyway. Notice what God told him to say. ~~Maybe we'll hear God saying the same to us.~~ He doesn't tell them to try read hard to come alive. He doesn't even tell them to repent. Dead bones can't try hard and they can't repent. So what God tells them is not what *they* must do but what *he* will do. "I will make breath enter you and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. Then you will know that I am the Lord." It's not a demand. It's not a command. It's a promise of what the Sovereign Lord will do *in* us and *for* us and *to* us, *unconditionally*. It is unconditional good news. God has entered into a solemn and everlasting covenant to renew his people when we become like dry bones. We come alive spiritually not when we say, "We will", but when God says he will.

When Ezekiel preached something began to happen. "There was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked

(Ezekiel says), and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them." The dead bones got organized. That was pretty miraculous in itself. But there was ~~only~~ one thing wrong. They were still dead. A church full of people, but they're all dead. Even the powerful and dynamic preaching of the Word of God can provide only a partial restoration of a church or of an individual Christian. Scattered skeletons are transformed into individual corpses, but they are still just as dead.

At the Presbyterian Congress on Renewal in Dallas, Texas last January, Dr. Sam Moffett, professor of missions at Princeton Seminary spoke of how African evangelists preached the Gospel there in East Africa. "We did not begin to preach," they said, "until we had called for the power of God. That power came. We took it and went forth to preach, and people came confession Jesus like the fish of the sea in number."

That's what Ezekiel learned. He got some response when he preached but only when the Holy Spirit came did his people come alive. After he preached, the text says that he prophesied to the breath. "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live". In Hebrew the word *breath* and *wind* and *spirit* are one and the same word. RUACH! "Come, Holy Spirit", he prophesied. "Breathe on me, Breath of God." So he prophesied and breath entered those bones; they came to life and stood up on their feet-- a vast army. What preaching was unable to accomplish by itself, prayer was.

There comes a time to stop criticizing the Presbyterian Church and to try praying for the power of the Holy Spirit to renew us. The power is for witness. Two-thirds of this world still does not have enough to eat. It goes to bed hungry every night. Mission is feeding. Still most of the world suffers and lies in pain. Mission is healing. More than half of the adult

world is blind. It doesn't know how to read. Mission is opening the eyes of the blind. It is literacy. Most of the world is oppressed by unjust powers. Mission is liberation. Go forth and feed and heal and open the eyes of the blind and liberate, and still you have not fulfilled your mission because two-thirds of this world has the greatest need of all. It still does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as its savior.

Where's the power? If we don't have it, perhaps it's because we've forgotten to ask for it. Those African evangelists said, "We did not begin to preach until we had called for the power of God." That power came. We don't call for the power; we don't get it; and we complain about our deadness.

As I read history, each period of spiritual renewal has resulted from people who own their dead bones. They own the bones of dead institutionalism. ~~They own the bones of their own spiritual dryness. They~~ do not criticize or blame other people for their spiritual dryness. They look at the valley of dry bones and identify their own skeleton. They own their own dead bones. It begins with the pastor and the elders. It filters down through the congregation and the denomination. We own our dead bones and cry out for the Holy Spirit to breathe on us and revive us and make us a vast army.

We're living in an exciting time in the history of our nation and church. It's exciting because God has allowed so many of his people, laity and clergy, to witness the failure of their plans and programs. Human effort, skill, and cleverness have been exhausted. And when all else has failed God's people are forced to call upon the Holy Spirit and the dead bones come to life.

If you're at one of those times when all else is failing, thank God. If you feel that your heart has become cold and hard, God has promised to

replace it with a heart of flesh-- open, warm, receptive. You are ready to receive the breath of life, the Spirit of the Lord himself.

Let us pray: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live".

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart:
Wear it from earth, through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

(A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on Pentecost Sunday, 26 May 1985, at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY, on the Old Testament Lesson for the day, Ezekiel 37:1-14)

LOVE LOAF MINUTE-
DEDICATION SUNDAY

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:7-12, NIV).

In the past few weeks, we together as a church family have been putting love into action, in a very practical sense-- by filling our Love Loaves.

Now as we dedicate the results of our action, our Love Loaf gifts, perhaps we can consider quietly in our own hearts the effects of this action in our own lives.

Have we been changed?

Have we experienced God's love in a deeper sense in our own hearts? Have we developed a greater love for those around us? Have we experienced hope in our own lives?

These are the questions we must answer ourselves.

Now as we bring these gifts before the Lord and dedicate them for His use, let us spend ~~a few~~ ^{the} moments in silent prayer thanking God for what He is doing and can continue to do in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors in developing countries.

Communion Devotion

This is the procedure we will follow. Listen carefully. The ushers will receive the morning offering as usual. After the plates have been passed in your aisle one member of each household, is invited to come forward ^{by the outside aisle} and stand to the side of the communion table until the ushers come forward with the plates. ~~Then~~ ^{As we will be the doxology and we say the doxology} the Love Loaves will be placed, with the offering, on or around the communion table and I will offer a prayer of dedication.

(Silent prayer)-- Prayer of dedication: Give us grateful hearts, our Father, for all your mercies, and make us mindful of the needs of others; we dedicate this money and these love loaves to build and strengthen your kingdom around the world. With this money we dedicate, as well, our hearts and minds and wills. So clothe us with your Holy Spirit that the remainder of our lives may be spent in your love and service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.