

H.C. PENTECOST 24.5.15

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

B/C/H

JOHN 15:26-27,16:4-15

BREATHING NEW LIFE

Ms. Muradi left Wardak in Afghanistan last year with her husband, daughter and two sons. "The women in Wardak are just like a property," she said.

Fifteen months ago, they sold their home, business and a dowry. They paid an Afghan agent \$10,000 for flights to New Delhi, and strapped the remaining cash underneath her clothing, she said, hoping to get to Australia.

They made it to Malaysia but lived 6 months without husband and father before he could join them. They boarded a boat for Indonesia then paid another agent, \$10,000 for the final leg of their journey to Australia, she said. Instead they were abandoned by the agent in Makassar, their life savings spent.

That family did better in some ways than the many who have been crammed into boats trying to cross the Mediterranean. Yet the quest for a better life, a place to call home, a place where people feel as if they are treated with respect and where they are safe, is a constant theme in our world.

Those who make it to a different land are looking for a new sense of Identity and if they find it they can also take responsibility and commit themselves to place and people.

Some people, of course, are constantly on the move. They can't settle. Most want a home, a place to feel you are 'yourself'. The best holidays can still end with people saying they're glad to be home; those who've never owned their own home often long for the day they can have the place where they feel they belong, with all its responsibilities as well as the security that can bring.

It's a constant theme of the Christian life and of the Bible as a whole – looking for the blessing of home. In Eden, after God breathed the very life into the world and into human beings, God's people in God's land enjoyed God's blessing and peace. After the Fall into sin, they were forever trying to get to a new land of blessing and peace. From that point on, both the welfare *and* the identity of God's people was bound up in the land.

Genesis 3 says the land will produce food only with hard work and sweat and toil; through Abraham there's a promise of a new place and people journey for years and years and years until they reach the Promised Land.

The land is a land of great blessing and all they could need but the promise goes with the demand that they don't forget the God who gave it to them. If you remember, there will be an abundance of all you need. But they do forget- and it all goes wrong, sending them out at the mercy of other invading nations, to exile. Struck down, sent out, treated badly, given no respect, a little like Ms Muradi, they lose not only their home but their hope and they forget who they are – they lose their sense of identity as belonging to God and needing to live like him and with him. They lose blessing and peace.

So we come to Ezekiel's prophecy. In chapter 34, you can read about the flock of God which lacks a real, true, good shepherd. No one meant to be a good leader is doing their job. The people are getting trampled down. Yet all is not utterly lost. Chapter 35 has a prophecy directed against Edom, one of the opposing nations. Doing the wrong thing will bring judgment, whoever you happen to be. Chapter 36 tells us how the Lord's people had to leave the land of great prosperity, the signs of God's great generosity and commitment to his people. They've let him down, but they *will* receive a new heart and spirit (36:26-29), and (36:35) says that *'the land laid waste has become like the garden of Eden'* . What a hope! The dream might just become true. Return to Eden- God's people in God's land, enjoying God's blessing and peace.

Now we arrive at Ezekiel's amazing vision and prophecy in chapter 37. We see a scene of utter hopelessness. This is not just a place of struggle. This is a place where the life has long gone. These are not just corpses but bones. There is no way they could live again. But the ground has been laid for hope of an end to suffering under the hands of others, a return to the land and a re-uniting where people have been divided (there's more of that in chapter 38).

Ezekiel looks in horror. It's obvious that those bones can't live again. Yet when he's asked if it is possible, he doesn't say 'No!' I wonder why? Something in Ezekiel gives him faith in the impossible God. This God had been portrayed as the life-giver, the breath-giver before: not just in Genesis 1

where he speaks things into life but also gives breath to human beings; in Psalm 139 the writer talks about being *'knit together in my mother's womb'*.

Ezekiel is asked to do this crazy thing of telling bones to get up and then shouting to the wind to come and bring life! How would you feel about the job?! Yet the Spirit of God that hovered over creation at the beginning of time is there again. This time it's not about making something new; it's re-animating what was dead. Resurrection. Look ahead into the distance and think of Jesus Christ himself.

If it's not obvious already, the bones dried up and lifeless were the exiles, with no hope at all, stuck in that place of death. But God's word, spoken by someone who trusts God, brings life. The exile has been like a graveyard. Now there's a chance to return to the land they had to leave but this time they're given a chance to return to a living fellowship with God himself.

Today is Pentecost. The celebration of the giving of the Holy Spirit to those first disciples after the resurrection of Jesus. With the breath and the fire and the wind and the peacefulness of the dove we have all the signs of God's longing to give us truth and comfort and power for others. We should be celebrating too! Those people were also people stuck and lifeless and without hope. We are also journeying, looking for the land that's home. There are plenty of places in the New Testament that talk about us being like aliens or just passing through in this life, looking for a 'heavenly country'. Whilst we do that journey we need the Holy Spirit if we're to keep going.

We have all sorts of phrases we use in everyday language about breath and life. We know what they mean – 'It took the wind out of my sails'; 'I just had the stuffing knocked out of me'. They are about being stopped in our tracks when we thought all was going well, almost like a physical blow.

Maybe it's when the plans you had fall apart; maybe it's when someone dies; maybe it's someone telling you what they really think about you and it hurts; maybe it's failing at something you thought you'd be really good at.

Whatever it is, it's those times when we need a sense that we're still heading for the right place, with the breath of life from God's Spirit in us, to lead us, as Jesus puts it, 'into all truth' so we can find the right way again whenever we fall off the track.

And if you want another story of travelling then what better illustration than the story of the prodigal son where the son begins to lose a sense of what blessings he's got, goes his own way but eventually turns back and finds his blessing in the home he always had with the forgiveness and welcome that he needs to bring peace.

So today, I hope these stories and words can help each of us. Perhaps we can remember:

1. God can do the impossible. Ezekiel saw bones become a living, breathing army of people. Jesus was raised from the dead. With the power of his breath, his Spirit, his word, God can do what seems impossible.

2. We need to keep on believing in the journey to the land where we find our true place, our security, our identity. Jesus called it heaven, the new Eden. It will be easy to feel we've had the wind taken out of our sails. Then we must pray for more of it – more of the power and courage of the Spirit, every day, not just for ourselves but for all that we're asked to do for others. *We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.*

3. We need to pray for the power of the Spirit to lead us into truth so that we are not duped into going the wrong way so that we end up stranded in a country that's not where we want to be, like so many refugees looking for a better place.

4. We should be celebrating and taking risks! Ezekiel must have felt pretty stupid and uncertain even though he did what God asked. But if it may lead to life, why not give it a try?!

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