

9th June 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **382** **Holy Spirit, come, confirm us**
 394 **Spirit of God, unseen as the wind**
 563 **O Jesus, I have promised**
 449 **Lord of creation, to you be all praise!**

Readings: **Acts 2:1-21**
 Ezekiel 37:1-14
 John 14:8-17, 25-27

“The valley of dry bones”

Let us pray: may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

'When the day of Pentecost had come, then they were all together in one place.'

So far so good: here we are. Here we are, just us, just here in this room tucked on a corner of a bad intersection that could be anywhere - hardly a centre of power and not really even known outside our own little circle.

'And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.'

Ummm, perhaps not us, not here after all? We just about manage the liability arrangements for a Christingle, and even then we cringe at the proximity of candle flame to fringed hair. If we don't even have enough cupboard space, tongues of flame are sounding just a little out of reach – a definite headache for the property and finance committee!

'And then they began to speak of God's deeds of power, and they understood each other in their many languages, and some had the presence of mind to be bewildered, asking 'what does this mean?' But some just scoffed and sneered – 'they are filled with new wine.'

We are here today because God came to the church and called it to begin speaking in a new way. The gift of Pentecost, touched by the Holy Spirit,

is having something to say: that is, carrying the WORD in the world. The gift of Pentecost is that God made us into prophets.

We may 'speak' in church – with words, and music, signs and symbols, actions and silence – laughter. Our hearts may be 'strangely warmed,' as was John Wesley's on the day he marked as his awareness of conversion – 24 May, 1738, after a lecture at Aldersgate in East London.

But our calling is for something beyond that indoor speaking –

The purpose of being church is to engage in prophecy out of doors: To speak that Word which names injustice, and convicts it. The word which frees from sin, and comforts the afflicted. And not just the sin we do as individuals, but the kind of sin that makes it a better life within five miles of this church to work for £80/week cash in hand in a foreign city than to risk religious persecution at home.

Because prophecy is not just about telling the future, but about telling what is going on in the present, in God's perspective. By the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's church is equipped to do that. You are God's prophets.

All well and good, but what has the Holy Spirit to do with the week to week work– property meetings and agendas and getting hymns chosen and prayers assembled, signs and actions arranged in a way we recognise as worship?

Tempting to think it will be about taking us away from day to day concerns – will be excitement and power from here on in.

I can feel those same faithful members of the property and finance committee hoping this means they are off the hook - But wait - on one side in the Acts of the Apostles is the story of the selection of an apostle to replace Judas. And on the other side is a story about the early church breaking bread, attending to the teachings of the apostles and trying to take care of the poor among their midst.

In other words, the story of Pentecost is positioned right between the election of officers and struggling over programs of Christian education, worship, and service. Right between institution and mission. And whatever it is that we're given on Pentecost, it doesn't lift us out and up over these earthbound realities. It drives us more deeply in.

So what is being a prophet about, if not excitement and power? Let us turn to Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel is a priest, writing to a people in exile.

That is, the prophet Ezekiel is writing at a time when his congregation is utterly dispossessed, and without much hope of renewal. He speaks in the reading we heard tonight from chapter 37 of God's hand coming upon him, of God leading him in a visionary journey. Dreams as real as real, sometimes more real than waking, because they can show us a truth we can't quite put into words.

God takes him to a valley of dry bones – bones left from a battle where the corpses decayed where they fell – God makes Ezekiel a witness to the desiccation, desolation.

What if the question God asks Ezekiel is the same question God whispers at the door of church, each week: 'Mortal, can these bones live?'

I have sometimes felt God asking me that question about church, when I look at my own dry worship-craft, and church life where the most dangerous decision seems to be whether to sing Charles Wesley or Graham Kendrick:

God asks, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' The temptation is to answer to quickly one of two ways: first the yes of denial, 'Yes, God here see – if I put it together this way, and that, and if we only buy a data projector and some new chairs, if I just choose the PERFECT hymn, then yes, God, these bones can live! If we just have the perfect mission strategy, or something better for the children, or more relevant, then the bones will leap around!!

Uh huh. How many different tag lines and mission strategies have you seen come and go in glossy paper in your churches?

The second too-quick answer is not denial, but despair: it doesn't matter what we do any more, the chance is past, the bones are dry, the day of church is done and we do well just to keep it ticking over as a little hiding hole to see us out. Mortal, can these bones live? 'No God, these bones are dead.'

Denial, despair.

I hope we see both answers are less than prophetic... in church, and in the world. Evil will be unimpressed with either of these answers. If you are tempted to either of them in relation to the fate of church life – denial (it isn't really dead) or despair (it's gone, we'd be better spending Sundays at Ikea), remember that neither of these responses has nothing to offer the woman on her £80 a week cash in hand. And neither has

anything to offer the person asking 'does God exist, and how can I find faith?'

Jesus offers more – remember what Peter said in the reading from Acts: the Spirit is poured out and they shall prophesy!! Was no 'maybe,' or 'some of them,' or 'the ones who go to the church down the road,' You will prophesy!

The answer that Ezekiel gives is more complicated than either denial, or despair: Mortal can these bones live? 'O Lord God, you know.'

However, we interpret the emphasis of this answer, Ezekiel has chosen deference to God's power over either vain hope in denial or equally vain despair. He has chosen obedience.

Deference, obedience; not fashionable traits in the brave new world of 'fresh expressions' of church, neither fashionable among those pushing social justice and community action. Not fashionable maybe, but they are still the traits of prophets. Deference and obedience to GOD, that is, not to fashion! Not to culture, not even to tradition - MLK jr – church called not to be a thermometer, measuring temperature but a thermostat, changing it!!

God says to Ezekiel, 'Prophesy to the bones, prophecy to the breath:' And the bones join together, and the breath responds, and they live. The word for breath here in the Hebrew is Ruach – the same breath that God breathed into the human form in Genesis 2.7 – this rushing wind which is that same breath spoken of in John 20.22 – when Jesus offered them peace and breathed upon them – that same breath which eases in each of us now – I ask you, is the God of Ezekiel, the God of Pentecost really so far away? Amen!

Ezekiel the prophet does not go about the field with wires and glue nor with bellows and air pumps. And our church people are not there to go about the circuit with whatever the symbolic equivalents would be – in church or our communities - it could as easily be Wesleyan hymns as data projectors – wires and glue to make the appearance of life.

Rather, God calls Ezekiel to prophesy: to call on God's behalf to the bones, the breath - and God does the work. Ezekiel holds the lifeless bodies before God, and God gives the breath.

You who have dared to come to church today, it is you to whom God is saying, 'Come from the four winds o breath, and breathe on these slain,' and we may yet live if you will speak.

Back to where I started, with the reactions of the people at the first Pentecost: some scoffed 'they are drunk,' some had the presence of mind to be bewildered: 'what does this mean?' when the prophets begin to speak, will we have the presence of mind to be bewildered, to ask 'what does this mean,' will we listen in wonder that we can understand, will we join the conversation with them, will we scoff?

The Holy Spirit is equipping each of you to be prophets, not with some formula of accepted church-speak that everyone already knows, but in your own language and voice, out of your own experience of God. In your own place and work.

Peter offered explanation, but hardly reassurance: 'God says: I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.... in those days I shall pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophecy.'

So how will you carry that commission to prophecy to the breath? Yourself? Where will you prophecy to the breath – in you home? In the market, in school, in voting – in the way you spend money?

And in worship, in church we should expect to be changed. Challenged, sometimes bewildered, asking 'what does it mean,' and to God, 'Can we too live?' Not for our sake, but because we are about God's business in the world where God is ahead of us.

The gift of Pentecost is being given a Word to say, and the promise that some, at least will understand: listen, it is just on your lips.