

Pentecost Sunday – 27th May 2012 – Wesley Uniting

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1-14 'The valley of dry bones'

Acts 2:1-21 'The day of Pentecost – the Holy Spirit
comes upon those gathered'

Theme: 'New life and hope for the people of God'

Introduction

Today we have two vastly different readings and yet they are co-joined by the Spirit of God breathing new life and hope into differing communities.

Let us look initially at the Ezekiel passage

The Hebrew Scripture set for today is the most dramatic and best known passage in Ezekiel describing an ecstatic experience and vision that the prophet has. It begins with the words: "The hand of the Lord was upon me and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of the valley; it was full of dry bones."

What amazing imagery. It is like an old battlefield where all the bones of those killed long ago lie bleached in the sun. Total death, destruction, despair and no hope abounds.

It is into this desolation that the prophet Ezekiel is called to prophesy – to a people devoid of hope. The setting is after the destruction of the southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC with the city of Jerusalem destroyed and the people in captivity in Babylon. As a nation Israel is dead. From the human point of view the nation is a graveyard of bones, physically and spiritually devoid of life. Ezekiel is called to:

1. Prophesy to these dry bones saying "I will make breath enter you and you will come to life" (vs 5).
2. Ezekiel did as commanded and the bones, tendons and flesh re-appeared but there was no life in them.
3. Then Ezekiel followed the command of the Lord to seek life or breath into these carcasses 'they came to life and stood on their feet – a vast army' (vs 10b)

The interpretation of the vision follows in vss 11-14. To the people of Israel through the prophet it is said to them: "I (God) will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will

know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.” (vs 14)

Words of hope to a despondent people. Words of assurance to a down-trodden, dejected nation.

Do these need to be words only for the defeated Jewish nation? Can't they also be words for a tired, struggling minority Christian church today in a post Christendom Australia?! A church that asks: “What will the church look like in thirty years?” “Will we still exist?” “Who will be the church of tomorrow?”

I love those words of hope from the prophet Ezekiel, speaking on behalf of God: “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.”

The creative, life-giving breath of God ('ruach Elohim' from the Hebrew) that gives physical and spiritual life to the people of God to this very day and onwards!! The Pentecost experience of Acts 2

The Acts reading is again a very well known passage that in a sense inaugurates the beginning of the early church.

It follows on from the election of Matthias as the replacement disciple for Judas from last Sunday's Acts 1 reading. Hence all the disciples, and we presume the inner circle of Jesus' followers, were together. It is into this setting that we have the experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is fifty days after the Sabbath of the Passover week ('pente' for fifty).

We have the description of the presence of the Holy Spirit in graphic detail.

1. 'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting'. Acts 2:2
2. 'They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them'. Acts 2:3
3. 'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues' (sometimes translated 'other languages'). Acts 2:4

We don't fully understand what happened here but it was a faith and life changing experience both for the disciples and for many of those gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Harvest. They heard the disciples speaking to them in their own language and then they heard Peter's sermon about Jesus the promised Messiah, the Son of God. From both the experience and the witnessing by Peter to his faith the early church experienced its first intake of new believers.

Some say why don't we have such amazing occurrences today? I don't know the answer to that but I still see the Holy Spirit being graciously and

sometimes unobtrusively busy all over the place working in ways that we may say are ordinary, but is God's work ever ordinary?!

Let me give you some examples of the Spirit at work unobtrusively:

- in the sincere concern of a friend for our health
- in those who take a stand against injustice
- in the grace of folk who go the 'second mile' unasked
- in the inner resources given to folk in times of crisis
- in those who dare to go against the tide of popular opinion
- in the sanity that enables us to admit when we are wrong
- in the resilience of people who fight for the rights of others
- in those who surrender some of their rights for the larger good
- in times when we share the Gospel in spite of our inadequacy
- in finding joy and fulfilment in unexpected places
- in refusing to let the greed of society take over our soul
- in rising above past failures and putting past hurts behind us
- in finding a central core of peace in the midst of turmoil
- in knowing ourselves to be children of God
- in knowing ourselves loved, even when we think we have been unlovable.

In a sense, this is just the edge of the Spirit's story. But God has changed us with the dual gifts of his Son, Jesus and the empowering, enduring gift of the Holy Spirit.

I could go on and on, reflecting on the quiet, pervasive ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst; that inspiring Lover whose fruits we tend to take for granted. The encouraging word, the gift of a meal when needed, the insight to speak with us when we are down, the friendly word when we need it most. In a real sense, it is only by the Holy Spirit that Christian congregations are able to stay alive and to give themselves in love to the world for which Christ died.

Summary

Hence today we celebrate with the Hebrew people, with the early Church and with the church today God's gift of hope and life to us in the form of the Holy Spirit who underpins the life, work and total ministry of Christ's work in the world.

We celebrate with joy the coming of the Holy Spirit afresh for each and all God's people – for you and for me. Amen!

Let us pray

Our thanks rise to you, Holy Spirit of the twenty first century, for expressing yourself among ordinary people who hear, receive and practice the Gospel, among those who yearn for the healing of divisions, among those who minister to the homeless and the outcaste, among contemporary prophets who seek justice and mercy. We praise you Lord.

Wonderful are you, Spirit of Pentecostal love, heaven and earth are full of your glory!

Glory be to you, O God most High. Amen! (Bruce Prewer)