

1st October 2023, Matins

Ezekiel 37: 15 – end and 1 John, 2: 22-2end

Mother Alice

I passed the Sycamore Gap tree in 2007 as I walked the length of Hadrian's Wall. The news of its deliberate felling this week seems to have touched a collective nerve. How could someone do such a thing to such a beautiful, iconic tree? The numbers of people sharing grief alongside memories and images of the tree has shown something quite remarkable. We are used to multiple images and stories of tragedy and loss flooding our news screens and clouding our minds, we become numb even to them. But in this story there is a hope alongside the grief: might the tree be able to regrow? Could the health of the living stump enable a flourishing once again?

Can these dry bones live? asks Ezekiel, in the first section of chapter 37. It's perhaps the most famous story in this prophetic book, as he walks through the valley of death and has the extraordinary vision of the dead and dry bones being slowly and meticulously brought back to life. And our passage for today proceeds from this vision, offering no less of a dramatic and hope-filled prophecy of the coming together again of the divided kingdoms of Israel, as two sticks joined together in God's hand.

The power of prophetic narratives using imagery from the natural world is what makes Ezekiel's message so memorable, and more importantly, so hopeful. The beauty and the fragility of the created order, our ever-increasing understanding of our dependence on it, and the devastation of the power we exert over it, is nonetheless held within a framework of hope – where everything that God has made and we have destroyed, can once again be restored, healed, revived, truly brought back to life in ways utterly beyond our comprehension. We may see the shoots of new life on a clumsily hacked tree stump as a symbol of hope, but how much more are the pages of Scripture filled with these powerful prophecies of all that God is doing to bring redemption to creation.

In our time where we have reached complete data saturation, and where most of the information we consume is narratives of suffering, pain, difficulty, frustration, argument, disunity or fear, how much more do we need to return to the Word of God, being nourished by it, being filled again with the Hope it contains?

Ezekiel's vision of the sticks is set during the time of exile, indeed probably more than 150 years since the division of the northern kingdom of Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah. It must have sounded ridiculous to his hearers that the now destroyed and scattered tribes of the north could even be resurrected, let alone joined in unity with those in the south. But the prophet's message is consistent: that in the eyes of God there is no such thing as 'lost' tribes, all are held in his memory, all are held in his hand, all are remembered and known, and loved, and can never be lost.

And the prophecy is stronger than just a physical gathering and uniting of the people, it speaks of deep healing in their relationship with God. God will bring them peace – shalom – wholeness, unity, wellbeing, fulfilment, prosperity. God will establish an eternal covenant with them. God will forgive them, and lead them back to true worship, giving them a King, a land, a unity, a purpose, a future, and a hope.

Knowing just how desperate things were in the time of the Babylonian exile, these words of prophecy are utterly remarkable. This is God doing what only God can do – redeeming the faults and failings of humanity. Time, and time, and time again this is what God does. And I believe that it doesn't really matter who God was speaking to or when or why, or even really what history tells us about what happened next, and the outworking of these prophecies – though it must be said that the Babylonian exile did come to an end and the Sanctuary was again restored in Jerusalem. What matters is the impact that Hope has on us, on our relationship with God and with one another.

Because without nourishment from the Word of God, living in the world is a confusing and scary experience. What do we look at and despair? What feels utterly hopeless, beyond redemption? If our daily bread in terms in information is news or social media, I suspect that what we consume will end up consuming us, bringing sadness and fear.

Scripture on the other hand brings Hope – and hope is the narrative that we can share – and embody, and bring to the table. God doesn't ask us to be optimistic people – what we are gifted in the narratives of all that He has done and has promised to do is this gift of Hope which is rooted in God's love and faithfulness. We're not called to be giddy and glib, we're called to be people who look for the coming of the Kingdom, who rejoice in all that God has done and is doing, bringing the whole created order to worship at his feet, returning with everlasting joy upon their heads. It is impossible to read Scripture without being challenged to rewrite the narrative of death that news often brings to us – as we read Scripture we have our eyes and ears opened to God, and beginning to see and hear God's narrative of life as the Spirit enables us.

The first letter of John I think speaks of this difference between light and dark in the information we receive and the voices we listen to. 'Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life'. It is so easy to let the narratives of despair and grief become dominant and overwhelming. A tree being cut down, a child being murdered, a devastating flood. The news will weigh us down, but the Word of God brings life and light. My challenge to us is therefore to think about the balance in our lives. What are we consuming? What impact does this have on our faith? The news – very often leads to overwhelm and depression. But Scripture – leads to faith and hope and love.

And so I offer you an invitation. Would you like to join the group who meet every morning on Zoom to say Morning Prayer? Or the group who meet every evening to say Evening prayer? Would you like to join our Monday Bible study? A Weekday communion? Do you have space this week to meet up with a friend to pray? If our balance of nourishment is wrong, it is hard to flourish and for faith to grow in and through us. Let us be the people of hope that God has created us to be, allowing God to feed and nourish and sustain us by his Word.

Amen