

Pentecost 2021 Vicky MacArthur

The last 10 days have been a time of prayer inspired by the Church of England's Thy Kingdom Come plan. It started with Ascension and it is not accident that it finishes with the outpouring of God's spirit at Pentecost. Our readings today are two familiar accounts in the history of Israel. Even if you haven't read or heard the passage from Ezekiel you might be familiar with the spiritual song *They Shall Praise Thee O Lord* first recorded in 1928. At first glance these accounts don't seem to have any connection. But many believe that Ezekiel's vision was really pointing to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the old testament Hebrew the word *Ruah* is used to describe the spirit, and in the new testament Greek the word *pneuma* is used. They both translate as breath or wind so in Ezekiel verse 9 we heard "Come, breath (*rûah*), from the four winds (*rûah*) and breathe into these slain." But they can also be translated as spirit, so in verse 14 "I will put my Spirit (*rûah*) in you and you will live."

Both translations build on the idea of an invisible, life giving force. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God that gives us life.

In our first reading, Ezekiel is brought to a valley that is filled with dry and lifeless bones. God asks Ezekiel if those bones all around him could live, to which he replies, O God, only you know. He then tells Ezekiel to prophesy, or pass on a message from God, to the bones. And as Ezekiel does so, the bones begin to assemble into bodies. Tendons hold them together, flesh covers the bones, and skin covers the flesh. And, finally, breath enters these bodies, a living breathing army.

At this time, Israel, as a people, was in Babylonian exile. They were an insignificant people in the midst of a mighty empire. God seemed to have abandoned them and all hope was gone. They were cut off from their homeland and the future they had envisioned there. Figuratively, they were nothing more than a pile of dry bones.

God told Ezekiel that this valley of dry bones represented the exiled people of Israel, and what had happened to these bones was also going to happen to Israel. God would make them a living breathing people and bring them into their own land. And he would put his Spirit into them. But Israel would not be the same place as they had left. The Jews would not be the same people who had left – literally as so much time had past and figuratively and so God creates a vision of a valley of bones.

Feeling abandoned by God, the people heard the words of the prophet speak to them about what God would be doing in their lives. The prophet told them that in this terrible crisis God was with them. The dry bones returning to life represented a return to life for Israel; a return to their own land, and God's Spirit being put into them.

We now come to Pentecost. Pentecost occurred 50 days after the Passover. This annual festival would draw large crowds to Jerusalem from wherever the Jews were scattered. The setting for the second chapter of the book of Acts is at the first Pentecost celebration after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus had ascended just 10 days prior to this and had instructed his followers to remain together in Jerusalem until the gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit, is given to them. Pentecost was a previously established Old Testament festival *Shavuot*—the feast of first fruits or harvest. On *Shavuot* Jewish people celebrate inheriting the land of Israel, marking the transformation of the children of Israel into a living breathing nation, on their journey to the one

land that they would forever be able to call home, the very thing promised in the vision given to Ezekiel. Now God poured a whole new meaning into this celebration with his "breath."

Up until the coming of God's Spirit at this Pentecost, the Jewish people continued to be dead men walking. They were alive physically, but dead spiritually. They were essentially a valley filled with dry bones. But when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, that valley of dry bones began to stir, to come together, and was given life through the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit.

The vision Ezekiel saw came to fruition at Pentecost and continues today in the life of each person who comes to faith in Christ. We "were dead in our transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). But God, because of his great mercy, made us alive in Christ (Eph. 2:4). Paul, in Romans 4:17, says that God gives life to the dead. And in Romans 8:11 he says that God will give life to our mortal bodies because of his Spirit (pneuma) who lives in us. When Ezekiel saw that valley of dry bones, he was looking at us. It is only because God has breathed his Spirit (breath) into us that we are alive. This is not a one off occurrence, we are told to be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 5:18.

But a bit like the Israelites in Ezekiel's time, we also are looking for a return, a return to normal or a new normal. We are just beginning to think about what the "new normal" might be like after the COVID 19 restrictions end. Life will look very different for all of us. We might even worry if "normal life" will ever return.

For many, life has been radically changed by this crisis – jobs lost, savings used up, celebrations not recognized, the sickness and death of so many, cut off from our families, our friends, our community and our church for months. It feels like the COVID 19 pandemic will mark our lives forever. We might feel a bit like a pile of dry bones right now.

We might wonder if we will ever 'live' properly again and the answer that we have might be like Ezekiel's "O God only you know".

But Pentecost is the promise that life can be renewed and the wind of the Spirit can blow us toward a future which holds purpose and happiness. It brings life back to people who have lost hope and who are apprehensive about the future.

In this present moment when everything looks so different – and often so grim - we have to allow the power of the Spirit to fill us again, heal us, renew us, and bring us back to life. In this terrible crisis God is with us. God is sovereign and his wind blows wherever he wants it to, and the promise of Jesus is that the wind blows in response to our requests (see Luke 11:13).

And as we come to end of this week of prayer for our friends, family and community, we also pray that empowered by God's spirit, we would grow in confidence to show and tell of God's love.