

Dioceses of Kimberley & Kuruman and Oxford



2023 Summit

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"Encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:13)

Journeying with Ezekiel

Three studies in Ezekiel

Prepared for the Link Summit 2023

From Bishop Steven

Dear Friends in Kimberley and Kuruman,

It's a joy to share three Bible studies with you. It's so good we can meet together across our two dioceses both in person and virtually. In Oxford and in Kimberley and Kuruman we cherish this partnership in God's mission.

I've chosen three passages from the Book of Ezekiel for these three studies although I will draw in other material. The studies are on the three themes first of the rebuilding after the pandemic; second on gender justice and what it means to be a person and third on environment and creation. We begin today with the picture of the Valley of Dry Bones from Ezekiel 37; the second study is on the picture of the new heart from Ezekiel 11 and we will also be referencing Matthew 7.1-12 and the third is on the River of Life in Ezekiel 47. I've called this little series of studies Journeying with Ezekiel. I really hope it will be helpful.

Let us pray...

The Valley of Dry Bones Rebuilding Ezekiel 37

Welcome to the first of our Bible Studies as we journey with Ezekiel to the valley of the dry bones.

The context of all three passages we will be exploring in Ezekiel is a political and theological and national catastrophe. Jerusalem has been destroyed by the armies of Babylon. The Temple of Solomon has been razed to the ground. Many of the people of Israel have been taken into exile in Babylon, thousands of miles from home. By the waters of Babylon they weep and lament.

Together they are trying to understand this disaster which has happened to them. To some it seems as though the gods of the nations are more powerful than the God of Israel so this is a theological crisis as well as a political crisis. To some it seems that God is punishing and judging Israel and therefore there is no hope of return and resurrection.

Ezekiel is uncompromising in his condemnation of the sins of the nation in the early part of his prophecy. There is no doubt as to why this disaster has come upon them. Israel has not been faithful to the Lord. But Ezekiel is also uncompromising in his steadfast hope. God has not abandoned his people. God is present in Babylon with the exiles. God has a future for the nation which is not grounded in the nation's goodness but in God's grace alone.

In Kimberley and Kuruman and in Oxford we are continuing to live with the legacy of the pandemic. Recovery is taking longer than we imagined in the beginning. There is a legacy of illness, of grief, of tiredness of changing habits, of living in the aftermath of disaster.

Ezekiel is called to minister in a time like this. He ministers to exiles living far from home in Babylon. The people who were once set free are now captives. The people of the promised land are far from home with no prospect of every returning. The people called by God feel abandoned and far away, surrounded by idols and cut off from their source of life. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

How does Ezekiel set about the task of rebuilding, of kindling hope? Ezekiel does not offer empty words of comfort or false platitudes. He's very clear that the nation has abandoned God. But he is also very clear that God has not abandoned Israel. Even though there is no prospect of return and restoration and rebuilding on the horizon humanly speaking, there is hope. Ezekiel's greatest contribution to theology is in his theology of hope: hope does not rest on trends or evidence; hope does not rest on our virtue or good deeds; hope does not rest on our clever plans and strategies or having powerful allies and partnerships. Hope rests solely on the grace of God.

Many Christians become confused between optimism and hope. They are not the same thing. Optimism is a mood: the feeling we have when the sun is shining and all is right with the world. There is nothing wrong with optimism – but it can disappear when the clouds come over and the rain starts to fall. Hope for the Christian is not a mood but a virtue. We are called to hope all the time even as we are called to love all the time, in season and out of season. Why? Because our hope rests on the power of God and not on ourselves.

Ezekiel captures all of this in the picture of the valley of the dry bones. The picture is similar in some ways to the river of life. We begin with a picture of death and desolation. This great army of people lies dead and lifeless, just as the desert and the stagnant sea have no life. These people have not died recently. They have died, their flesh is gone, their clothes have rotted, their bones have bleached white in the sun, their parts are scattered across the valley. There is no prospect of recovery.

Ezekiel is told to prophecy first to the bones. *“Mortal can these bones live? O Lord God you know.”* It's a question we may ask of a church, of a community, of a nation. Can these dry

bones live? Ezekiel is obedient and speaks God's word to the bones: *"O dry bones hear the word of the Lord."*

"So, I prophesied as I had been commanded and as I prophesied suddenly there was a noise, a rattling and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them and skin had covered them but there was no breath in them."

This is the first part of the rebuilding. It is a rebuilding based on the sure foundation and the life-giving power of the word of God. It is a stage-by-stage rebuilding, a little at a time. We might identify with some of the rebuilding we are doing after covid: reconnecting the church, the body of Christ. Starting again from the ground up. Taking the skeleton of the body of Christ and growing ligaments and sinews and flesh and skin. In Ephesians 4 Paul refers to ministers as the ligaments and sinews in the Body of Christ, perhaps thinking of this passage. Sometimes this kind of building takes many years. It's good to remember that the people of Judah spent 70 years in exile in Babylon.

But then there is the second, dramatic stage. The bodies are whole again but they are not alive.

"Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God. Come from the four winds O breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me and the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

A vital key to understand this passage is to know that the Hebrew word ruah means breath and wind and spirit. The three are the same root word and concept. Wind and breath and spirit are all rolled together in this passage. It is the spirit which gives life to those who have died, God's spirit which needs to breathe afresh upon God's church, these dry bones, so that they come to life and live again.

Ezekiel's hope is remarkable. We read Ezekiel's prophecy in the light of the two great New Testament events. The first is the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day: new life is brought to the dead. Ezekiel imagines the resurrection in his great picture and foreshadows the great resurrection when all those who have died in Christ will rise to new and eternal life with God. The second is the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when the sound of a mighty wind fills the room and tongues of flame appear on the heads of the disciples and they speak in new languages.

Ezekiel is forging hope in the people of God without the benefit of Easter Day and Pentecost. His images shape our understanding of resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. God is the one who rebuilds and restores and God is the one who gives new life. Why does God do this? What is the purpose of the vision?

Ezekiel tells us in the very next verse. Listen carefully:

“Then he said to me, Mortal these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.”

I don't know if you can hear echoes of that song in the life of the church today. Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are cut off completely. That is to a greater or lesser extent our song. The stuffing has been knocked out of us. We are winded. We are knocked out and on the mat. What does God say to us and especially to Christian ministers:

“Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘Thus says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from my graves O my people and I will bring you back to the land of Israel....I will put my spirit within you and you shall live and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’” Not because of who we are or what we have done or our skill and our virtue but because this is the very nature of God.”

Where does rebuilding and renewal begin? Renewal begins with the rekindling of hope and purpose and vision. The rekindling of hope and purpose and vision begins when just one person begins to sing a different song. No longer the song of despair: we are dried up and our hope is lost, but the song of joy and hope and new life. That is in the midst of the hard work of gathering and placing bone on bone and rebuilding structures. This is the work of spiritual renewal, of seeking God, of finding the stream in the desert and seeing life in the world around us.

It's time for the church to sing that different song.

Questions

How is your church singing the song of Israel: ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are cut off completely’?

Where are your signs of early rebuilding: of bones and sinews coming together and rebuilding the body of Christ? Where is new ministry emerging?

What are the signs of spiritual renewal and life? What is the new song you need to sing to rekindle hope and new life for God's people?

Pray together for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A heart of flesh Ezekiel 11.14-20 and Matthew 7.6-12

Welcome to our second Bible Study as we journey with Ezekiel and explore the prophet's powerful images of hope. New life for the whole of creation flowing from the place of worship and sacrifice, almost at the place where hundreds of years later, Jesus will offer his life for the life of the world. New life and restoration in rebuilding communities, churches, nations as we prophesy and speak words of life to the parts of the Body of Christ, so that they join together, and as we prophesy to the Spirit and pray for the Spirit to come and give new life to the church. We exchange songs of despair and lament for new songs of hope and joy.

In this second study we come to a second powerful image which Ezekiel has borrowed from his near contemporary Jeremiah: the image of a new heart. Both prophets are discovering that a change in the nation can't be brought about through external changes only. Deep change in the nation will only come about through inner transformation – people being transformed from the inside out by the grace and gift of God.

Jeremiah develops this language in 31.31-34. Jeremiah looks back to the old covenant with Moses where the law and God's expectations were written on tablets of stone. Jeremiah looks forward to a new covenant, which Christians believe is fulfilled in Christ. This new covenant depends on inner transformation, on laws being written on human hearts:

“But this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after those days says the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more”.

Ezekiel takes this language and develops it further. His insight into the human condition is if anything even more bleak. Ezekiel is writing slightly later than Jeremiah. He has seen more of the human condition in exile perhaps. He knows even more clearly that humankind cannot change in and of ourselves. Ezekiel is pondering the return and regathering from exile, confident that it will happen. But if there is no inner change, surely that return will be meaningless. The injustice and evil will remain and God's people will still be under God's judgement.

This is Ezekiel's development of Jeremiah's language:

“I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people and I will be their God” (11.19).

Ezekiel's image is caught beautifully in the verse from the well known song, I the Lord of sea and sky:

*“I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my words to them.
Whom shall I send?”*

All through Ezekiel, the transformation in creation and transformation in society is linked back to a transformation in the human heart. A transformation in the human heart is linked in turn to a transformation in society which is linked to a transformation in creation. That is why the five marks of mission have to be held together by the Church. Evangelism cannot be separated from loving service and social action and creation care. Jesus calls us to this mission which is both deep and wide.

Ezekiel's vision of a heart of stone is echoed in Matthew 7 where there is another stone. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to come to the Father as one who loves them and cares for them and wants to give good things.

“For everyone who asks receives and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for bread will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish will give a snake?”

We can't know for sure, but it's possible that Jesus is here offering a deliberate echo back to Ezekiel: is there anyone who wants to change their stony heart for a heart of flesh? Ask God who gives good things to all. Seek that inner transformation, that new humility of heart before God.

Is it possible to apply all of this to the theme of gender justice and injustice which is one of the themes of our consultation? I believe it is, and there are profound lessons here. It's clear from Ezekiel's prophecy that his words apply to women and to men, to all people equally. One of the key strands of justice the church has been reflecting on globally is gender justice and equality. The theme of gender justices runs, of course, through the United Nations millennial goals. As a church we have colluded with society in discrimination against women in rights, in remuneration, sometimes in violent treatment.

Ezekiel's image helps us to address part of the question of how change happens when we identify deep systemic sin in society or in the church.

It is important to own it and recognise it. It is important to repent. It is important to change policies and rules and structures. But if that is all that happens, an outward change, then the danger is that the transformation will not be deep enough. It will remain on the surface of our lives.

We all need something deeper: a transformation from within, a transformation of the heart symbolised by that change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. All of us need to see and feel and understand the pain and the consequences of gender inequalities. All of us need to be ready to change: to be willing to share authority and power and resources – and to be willing not to collude with injustice and to right wrongs. Those are inner transformations. That inner transformation will lead then to lasting change.

So you may want to reflect together on this powerful image of the transformation of the heart. You may want to tell stories of gender inequality from your own place and reflect on how conditions have become better – or indeed grown worse and the role that inner change has played a part in that. And you may want to pray for one another for a softening of hearts of stone and the growth of hearts of flesh.

May Ezekiel's vision of change take hold of our lives in the grace of God and lead to the transformation of people, of societies and of the whole of creation. Amen.

Questions

Are you able to tell a story of how your own heart and mind has been changed on an issue which has led to wider change?

What are the most critical issues in gender justice in your community? Whose heart needs to be changed?

How are you praying and working for this change, and how does Ezekiel's vision inspire you?

Environment and Creation

The River of Life

Ezekiel 47

Let Us Pray

Welcome to the third of our Bible Studies as we journey with Ezekiel through a time of political and theological and national catastrophe. Jerusalem destroyed by the armies of Babylon, the Temple of Solomon razed to the ground, the people of Israel in exile thousands of miles from home. By the waters of Babylon they weep and lament.

“Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east) and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple south of the altar.”

A tiny trickle of water flowing from the place of worship and of sacrifice. Ezekiel invites us to follow the journey of this droplet, this tear drop, this sign of life. We know life in the universe cannot exist without water. Astronomers are currently searching for signs of life on other planets. We know there are tens of thousands of planets in the universe without life – and that means without water.

The final part of the Book of Ezekiel leads up to this vision of the droplet of water flowing from the place of prayer and sacrifice. Ezekiel has been describing the building of a new temple in the desert from Chapter 40 through to Chapter 46. The new temple is impressive but empty. Everything is prepared but there is no life. But then the prophet sees and follows this tiny trickle, imperceptible but so powerful flowing from the place of prayer.

We follow the stream. The growth is slow at first. After a thousand cubits the water is ankle deep. Another thousand cubits and it is knee deep; Another thousand and the water comes up to the prophets waist. Another thousand *“and it was a river I could not cross for the water had risen it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, Mortal, have you seen this.”*

The depth of the river is the first miracle. The river grows as it flows from the temple, nourished by the worship and prayers of God’s people.

But the second is greater still. The river is powerful and brings life in massive abundance. Ezekiel retraces his steps:

“As I came back I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes every living creature that swarms will live.”

This beautiful world, made by God, alone of all the planets in the universe teems with life. In the seas and rivers, in the skies, above ground, below ground there is life on earth. There is

just one place on the entire planet where nothing grows or lives. That place is called today the Dead Sea. This is the sea of stagnant waters in Ezekiel's vision. The deadest place on earth.

This is Ezekiel's powerful vision of hope and of the kingdom of God. So powerful is this water which flows from the temple, this droplet, that when it reaches the Dead Sea, the waters will become fresh and everything will live where the river goes. Everything will live where the river goes. Everything.

The fish will be of a great many kinds; there will grow all kinds of trees for food; their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.

This is a wonderful vision of God's kingdom which embraces life in the whole of creation. It's a remarkable and a chastening thing to read this story of abundance and life in creation next to and in the midst of the disaster of climate change and environmental degradation.

We should weep when we reflect on what we have done to God's beautiful world. We have poisoned the seas; we have filled the air with fumes; we have wrapped the earth in a blanket of greenhouse gas; we have driven species to extinction; we have spoiled the world and we, like the exiles, sit under judgement.

But there is hope. There is hope of renewal and healing. That hope must begin from and be nurtured in the place of prayer and sacrifice as we draw apart in our worship. That hope begins in our own lives in that tiny droplet of life. We follow the river to see change and depth and life and transformation for the world. To see the literal healing and renewal of creation and the blessing of the earth.

Questions

What resources and strength and hope do you draw from Ezekiel's vision?

How are you stirred to treasure the earth as you read Ezekiel's vision?

What are the impacts of climate change in recent years in K and K and in Oxford?

What are you doing together to heal and renew the earth?