

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year A – Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 37: 15-28
Psalm 124
1 John 2: 22-29
Mark 9: 28-50

Today we come to the end of a series of readings from Ezekiel. When the ‘Word of the Lord’ first comes to him, (a priest of the Babylonian Exile, in the fifth year after the departure from Jerusalem); the Lord speaks to a ‘rebellious nation (chapter 2:3). Over the past three weeks we have shared readings in which the Lord speaks against ‘the false prophets of Israel’; ‘the elders’ - ‘the shepherds’ of Israel; the people themselves.

Today, in chapter 37, the mood changes to one of hope and promise.

It commences in verses 1-14, with one of the great visions given to Ezekiel – ‘the Valley of Dry Bones’:

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’

I said, ‘Sovereign LORD, you alone know.’

⁴Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’

⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”’ ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”’ ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I 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.”

Our reading today commences at the next verse, where Ezekiel receives another instruction from the Lord – an instruction for a visual aid!

He is to take two sticks of wood – one marked for the people of Judah the other for the people of Joseph (Ephraim); these two sticks representing the divided Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Holding them in his hand; displaying them to the people, they appear to become one stick signifying the restoration of a single nation – “under David, as king”. We are of course long past the historical David – this is a prophecy that God’s future relationship with His people will be through ‘the House and Lineage’ of David; as we know today – through Jesus.

There are a further 11 chapters in Ezekiel and in them we find one of the “greatest visions” he received.

He sees the new ‘Temple’ and accurately describes all of its dimensions. He witnesses the ‘Lord’s Glory’ filling the Temple and is given the rules and regulations for the conduct of worship.

This Temple has never been constructed! Many orthodox Jews believe it is yet to come.

At the end of a siege the first deportation from Jerusalem to Babylon took place, in the view of many scholars, in 597BC. Jerusalem was not destroyed at this time but a ‘puppet’ king was put in place by the Babylonians. It was only later, when the vassal state rebelled that the city and Solomon’s Temple were destroyed and more inhabitants deported to Babylon.

The first return from exile was around 536BC and the returnees commenced the rebuilding of the Temple, only to give up around 520BC because of opposition from the local people. Inspired by Haggai and Zechariah they recommence construction and the Temple is finished by 516BC. This Temple (named after the Jewish leader and ‘Governor of Jerusalem’, Jerubbabel) was a poor reflection of its splendid predecessor – Solomon’s Temple.

We read that some, who had returned and remembered the ‘First Temple’, wept when they saw the new building; it was so poor in comparison.

(One commentator has noted that to this day the Jews only refer to two Temples – those of Solomon and Herod. They are embarrassed by any reference to the Temple built by Zerubbabel!)

Some decades after the Temple had been completed; Ezra, the priest, came back from Babylon bearing more gifts, this time from King Artaxerxes of Persia. The other figure we associate with the return from the Exile is Nehemiah – he returned to Jerusalem, as the new Governor, some 13 years after Ezra and oversaw the reconstruction of the city walls. It was about this time, we read in Nehemiah 8, that Ezra (described as a scribe but also as a priest) read the Law of Moses to the assembled people:

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!'

Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah – instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.'

By the end of this period many of the exiles and their descendants have returned to Jerusalem; they have been reacquainted with 'The Law'; a Temple has been rebuilt; the city walls have been reconstructed.

That temple was to be extended in Herod's day, only to be destroyed completely by the Romans.

'Temple Mount' is today the site of 'The Dome of the Rock' and the 'al-Aqsa Mosque' – both 'holy' sites to Islam. The only Jewish remain is the 'Western Wall' – part of Herod's expansion of the second Temple.

The Temple shown to Ezekiel, in his vision, is still to be built – a Temple, larger, on a far grander scale than those of Solomon, Jerubbabel or Herod. Some of our Jewish 'brothers' still look forward to its construction but post New Testament the need for a 'Temple' is past.

Psalm 124 is described as "*A song of ascents – written by David*". Songs of ascent were sung by pilgrims going up to the Temple to worship.

This Psalm focuses on the Lord's protecting arm. It starts by considering what would have happened if the Lord had not been with them:

¹ **If the LORD had not been on our side** – let Israel say –

² if the LORD had not been on our side when people attacked us,

³ they would have swallowed us alive when their anger flared against us;

⁴ the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us,

⁵ the raging waters would have swept us away.

The remainder of the Psalm offers praise for this protection and ends in a confident statement:

⁶ Praise be to the LORD, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.

⁷ We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.

⁸ **Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.**

We have concluded our readings from Acts – Paul is imprisoned in Rome, confident in the Lord as he; writes his letters to the Churches and awaits his appearance before Caesar - almost certain of his inevitable execution.

We have read in Ezekiel how God's people deserted Him – turning to practices and customs of their neighbours; Paul constantly warns in his letters against false influences. So to in 1 John 2, our reading today, we have a warning (verses 23-24):

²³ **No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.**

²⁴ **As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.**

Verse 24 conveys a promise but there is also, implicit in this statement, the possibility of "not remaining in Him" and all its consequences.

We can link this passage with our Gospel passage in Mark where John says to Jesus that they had told someone to stop 'healing' in the name of Jesus because he wasn't part of the "in" crowd.

We have that classic rely of Jesus:

'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us.

Against this, we remember that encounter in Acts where Paul met the 'seven sons of Sceva' claiming to 'heal' in the name of Jesus – **whom Paul preaches**. Perhaps we see the difference in these final words. The 'sons of Sceva' were invoking somebody Paul preached – not somebody they knew personally.

Just as John, in his letter, has implied that it is possible to "fall away", so Jesus reminds us that our lives reveal our true allegiances. We have an example here of the "hyperbole" with which Jesus often spoke – exaggeration to make a point. "If your hand or foot causes you to stumble" – cut it off; not literally but do root out the cause.

Jesus ends this passage with reference to salt – something which is good but can lose its saltiness. Back in July I wrote something for the web-site about my time in Uganda, experiencing salt in a form that would have been familiar at the time of Jesus. We remember that in the Sermon the Mount Jesus says to his followers : “You are salt to the world – but if salt has lost its flavour what is its use?”

Our challenge today is to ask ourselves – Is there anything which separates us from the Lord? Is there anything in our lives which could be described as a ‘stumbling block’ for others?

We are called to be “salt” and to be “light”.

May we examine our lives and commit them again in the words of Chris Bowater that concluded that article on salt losing its ‘savour’:

*Here I am, wholly available;
As for me, I will serve the Lord.
Here I am, wholly available;
As for me, I will serve the Lord.*

The fields are white unto harvest,
But O, the labourers are so few;
So Lord, I give myself to help the reaping,
To gather precious souls unto You.

The time is right in the nation
For works of power and authority;
God's looking for a people who are willing
To be counted in His glorious victory

As salt are we ready to savour?
In darkness are we ready to be light?
God's seeking out a very special people
To manifest His truth and His might