**Cranmer Group Sermon Transcripts & Prayers**

**Sunday March 29th**

**Rev. Tim Chambers**

**‘Hope That Helps’ (Ezekiel 37:1-14)**

When I accepted the post of Vicar of the Cranmer Group back in January, I – like all of you, no doubt – could not have imagined that I’d be giving you my first sermon *not* in one of the Benefice’s six beautiful churches, but as I now find myself doing: at my desk; speaking into a voice recorder on my smartphone; to post this afterwards as a podcast on the hastily-rejigged Group website. My self-taught IT skills have certainly improved *considerably* over the course of the last few days!

A few weeks after my acceptance, once the date for the licensing service had been fixed, and when I’d worked out that *this* Sunday would be my first official one with you all, I looked at the Bible readings the Church of England’s Lectionary appoints for today. And I was thrilled to see that the Old Testament passage is that from the Prophet Ezekiel, which I’ve just read – what’s often famously known as ‘The Valley of Dry Bones’.

And, despite the utter change in almost all of the circumstances in which we all now live, compared to even three weeks ago, I’m *as* delighted *today* that this is the appointed reading, as I was then. And - although there’s perhaps even *more* relevance and importance *now* to each one of us from Ezekiel’s words - the essential message that I’d thought to draw out of the passage is the same under our locked-down, self-isolating circumstances *now*, as it would have been on the perfectly normal late winter’s day when I first looked at my Bible, and started to think what I might share with you all, in my very first sermon as your Vicar.

A bit of context to the passage, first. Ezekiel was amongst the Israelites taken to the city of Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem, just after 600B.C. His writings - addressed to God’s exiled people, bereft in that city far away from their homes in the Holy Land – largely have a dual purpose. Firstly, in the early chapters of the Book of Ezekiel, they condemn the people of Israel for their unfaithfulness to God, with the result that He has permitted them to be defeated, enslaved and carried off by the Babylonians to their lands. But, secondly, in the latter part of the Book - from where our reading today comes - Ezekiel’s prophetic words take on a very *different* tone: they are dominated by visions of *restoration* and *salvation*.

In our extraordinary, vivid reading, Ezekiel is led in a vision by God’s hand, to a place of mystery – a valley out of space and out of time, in which the ground as far as he can see, in every direction, is covered with dry bones. A place seemingly without life; seemingly without hope.

But God encourages Ezekiel to speak words of prophesy over the bones and, miraculously, they spring together, rattling as they interlock once more. Tendons and flesh and skin clothe them, and from a scattering of skeletons across the valley floor, comes a vast army once again; God’s people, full of new life.

In any year, this image has a huge resonance at this point in the calendar. Winter has (hopefully by now, if not always) gone. The dead, cold landscape replaced by hectare after hectare starting to be covered in crops shooting through; lambs out in the fields in their hundreds; the hedges full of flowering blackthorn; the birds singing with a volume absent for many, many months. But this year, especially, as we hear of so many lives endangered - or, tragically, even ended – by the death-bearing Coronavirus, Ezekiel’s vision has an even greater power.

The power of that vision is, I believe, threefold, in what it tells us about the person of God, and how he relates to the whole of humanity - and to each and every one of us.

And we see the first aspect of this at the end of verse 3 of our passage:

‘The Lord asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”
I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”’ Even when he’s surrounded by complete desolation, Ezekiel recognises that God has power & authority infinitely above and beyond *anything* of humankind. He is “Sovereign” over every aspect of Creation; He alone knows what is possible - “can these bones live?” - since He is the *only* one who has the power to *make it possible*. And not only is He sovereign, God is *good* - as Psalm 107 assures us, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever!”

Firstly, God is sovereign over all; Creation is in His hands; He loves us; and He is good.

Secondly, the presence of God brings life, even where it appears there is none. The Spirit of God - the Holy Spirit – works through the breath with which Ezekiel prophecies over these bones, and – miraculously! – there springs forth life.

In Hebrew, the word for breath, and the word for the Holy Spirit – ‘ruach’ – is exactly the same. At a time when a huge proportion of our news revolves around the necessity of artificial ventilators to keep so many alive, it’s doubly resonant that the breath that is spoken by Ezekiel, is existence itself: as it says in verse 14,
‘“I will put my Spirit in you, & you will live”, declares the Lord’.

So, firstly, God is sovereign, and He is good.

Secondly, the presence of God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, brings life.

And, thirdly and finally, I have a confession to make to you all! Not a good start, on my first Sunday as your Vicar, and even less good when I tell you that it involves a Biblical error.

For my ordination as Deacon in Southwell Minster, back in the summer of 2016, as a number of clergy do, I had my white deacon’s stole specially made. For both Clare and I, independently of one another, we’d discovered that one of our “go-to” Bible verses is Psalm 121. So when I was thinking of what images or verses I’d like on my stole, *that’s* what I settled on – some beautifully-embroidered Lakeland Fells, and the starting words of that Psalm on it as well: “I lift up my eyes to the hills, Where does my hope come from?”

Except it’s not. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my HELP come from?” is what the verse *actually* is, and I’d told the embroiderers the wrong word (which is still on my stole today, by the way!).

Except that, in so many ways, it’s *not* the wrong word.

‘“Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel,” [said the Lord]. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone.”’

What the people of Israel *really* needed, above all, was not *help*, but HOPE. The hope that only God - through the breath, the presence, of His Holy Spirit; restoring, reviving, renewing – the hope that only God can bring.

And it’s this same HOPE that He brings to us today.

The hope that we find in the beauty of new spring life blossoming forth all around us.

The hope that Clare & I find in the cries of the new life – tiny Alba – born to our next-door neighbours on Thursday, & whose cries drift through the semi-detached wall into our home.

The hope that – *I* hope – we *all* share in a new beginning, with and in Christ, here in the Cranmer Group; that together we may see *so* much more of the Kingdom of God *burst* through in our communities and in our churches.

And the loving hope that we share as Christians, that casts out the fear that so many are feeling at the moment; the loving hope that we share in the face of this unprecedented medical, economic and social emergency; and the loving hope that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have - uniquely - to offer to others.

Yes, we call on God in our prayers for his *help;* help that He might intercede in the problems that we and those around us face. But it is the *HOPE* that we have, founded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that changes everything; the loving hope that, even in the face of the vast medical challenges we and other nations all face right now, is greater than death; the loving hope that conquered death, and that still conquers death today.

So, when it looks or feels – as maybe it does for many of us at this precise moment – as though we’re faced in life with nothing but a similar heap of dry bones to Ezekiel; when, as was the case for the people of Israel, “our hope” [appears to have] ‘gone”, I suggest we have three things from today’s passage, onto which we can hold firm, in our faith:

First, the knowledge that our God is SOVEREIGN over everything, and that He is GOOD.

Second, that the presence of God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, brings LIFE wherever it flows.

And third, again, we have not just the help, but the HOPE that we find in the all-loving person of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. And this hope, greater than death, changes everything.

I pray that you, and all your loved ones, will know this living hope at work in your lives, today and always; and that between us, we will be able to bring it into the lives of every man, woman and child, throughout the whole of our Cranmer Group, over the weeks and months to come.

In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

**Prayers for Today**

**The Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (Common Worship)**

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour’s blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Intercessions for use during this Coronavirus outbreak**

Let us pray to the Lord,
who is our refuge and stronghold.

For the health and well-being of our nation,
that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:
Lord, hear us,
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:
Lord, hear us,
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For our homes and families,
our schools and young people, especially the staff & pupils
of Archbishop Cranmer Academy, & of Orston Primary School;
and all in any kind of need or distress:
Lord, hear us,
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For a blessing on our local community,
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:
Lord, hear us,
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.
Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 5th Sunday of Lent (Book of Common Prayer)**

We beseech thee, Almighty God,
mercifully to look upon thy people;
that by thy great goodness
they may be governed and preserved evermore,
both in body and soul;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**A Closing Blessing for Today**

May Christ crucified draw you to himself,
to find in him a sure ground for faith,
and a firm support for hope,
and the assurance of sins forgiven;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**