

## **Sermon, St German's Cathedral, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

### **Readings: Ezekiel 33 7-11; Matthew 18: 15-20**

You may have noticed that when I have the opportunity to preach I quite often use the Old Testament reading as the basis for what I want to say. One of the reasons for this is that, in general, we are less familiar with the Old Testament, even though these were the Scriptures that Jesus and his contemporaries had – the basis that the Jews had for centuries to understand God.

Ezekiel is quite a long book – it has 48 chapters – and is perhaps best known for the passage about the valley of dead bones, and the way that with a rattling sound they came together, were covered with flesh and skin and as Ezekiel prophesied they came to life – a whole army of them! It is also known for some of Ezekiel's visions, which are reflected in the book of Revelation.

Ezekiel was born about 620 years before Christ. His father was a priest and it's likely that he was being trained to follow in his father's footsteps. He probably lived in Jerusalem in relative calm, although the Babylonian empire was threatening to overcome Judah. And when Ezekiel was in his mid-twenties King Nebuchadnezzar invaded and took Ezekiel and many other key citizens and families to live in exile in Babylon.

It's hard to imagine what that was like. Ezekiel would have expected to formally enter the priesthood when he was thirty. But instead he was living in a foreign land. There was no Temple to serve in. His whole planned future had disappeared.

But God called him. To be a prophet. He saw visions of God and found that his vocabulary was inadequate to describe things that were so other worldly. He tried! He mentions clouds, lightning, brilliant light and fire. He struggles to tell of the creatures he saw and their mode of transport. High above a sapphire throne was a man whose appearance was of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel responded in the only way he thought appropriate – to fall on his face before the presence of God.

And he heard the voice of God calling him to be a watchman, or sentinel.

There are various references to watchmen in the Bible. Their duty was to use their eyes to spot danger, and to warn as necessary. Ezekiel's calling wasn't so much a call to stand on a tower on a high spot in the environment to look for physical danger, but to warn the Israelites about their behaviour.

God's words sound very harsh to our ears. Ezekiel is being held to account. If he doesn't warn the wicked and endeavour to make them change their attitudes and behaviour, then his own salvation is in doubt. But if he does warn them, even if they don't change, he himself will be saved. The watchman's duty is to watch and warn; the citizens' duty is to listen and react – to seek safety within the city walls.

Ezekiel is concerned with how his people should live in relationship with God; the life of faith can't be reduced to a credit balance of good or bad deeds. Living with God is a dynamic process; from the divine perspective, it is only possible through the exercise of forgiveness so that we can continue to live in relationship with God. From the human perspective, continually turning to

God in repentance permits the receipt of forgiveness so that we can continue to live in relationship with Him.

At the beginning of worship each Sunday morning we acknowledge our shortcomings and are assured of God's forgiveness, providing a clean sheet for the coming week. But, like washing our hands to make sure we're not passing on infections, it's good to stand before God every day, just as we are, letting his forgiveness wash over us. To relish his "otherness". To be aware of his holiness. To reset the dynamics of our lives.

Once an acknowledged member of God's family, life is not the same. Day by day God seeks to transform us into the living image of his Son Jesus. Whether chipping away at stone, or preparing the detail of a mould, a new sculpture is not achieved in a day. And if we're the sculpting material, being shaped can be painful.

If you think back to times which have been challenging for you, can you see that they have been formative? For me, leaving teaching after only two years may have been one of the best decisions I've ever made. But it was a difficult one. Like Ezekiel who had expected to be a priest, I had no idea what to do next. I was bruised by the experience of trying to teach some youngsters whose main aim in life seemed to be making my life hard. I was crushed by the deputy head who told me I'd be better off as a social worker or a Methodist Minister. I felt I was letting my parents down.

Looking back, I can see that those two years in a secondary school provided skills, knowledge and experience that enabled me to do other things. My working life may have turned out very differently from what I had expected, but it gave me three years of enjoying the beauty of Dorset, the opportunity of living in a 400 year old, octagonal thatched cottage, and the chance to learn about radio broadcasting. It led me to live in Africa, to the privilege of running two charities and to become a lay minister in this lovely place.

I had understood that God had called me to be a teacher. I had thought that would be my life. God used the difficult times to make me who I am – faults and all! I'm still a work in progress.

Can you see who God has called you to be? How he has shaped you? Are you still open to being shaped, to take new opportunities?

A little earlier in his book (chapter 22 v 30) Ezekiel hears God condemning the behaviour of the Israelites – even their priests, saying:

*I looked for someone to stand up for me against all this, to repair the defences of the city, to take a stand for me and stand in the gap to protect this land so I wouldn't have to destroy it. I couldn't find anyone. Not one.*

Could it be that God is calling you to stand in a gap? It might be to call for justice in this land or in our relationship with others. Or it might be in a less dramatic role. Repeated surveys in the UK suggest that 6% of the population are often or always lonely. If the figures are similar here in Peel, that means that some 360 people in our own town are lonely. It's likely that someone who lives near you would appreciate some company. Or you might like to become a volunteer with Silver Line – the telephone friendship service for the over 55s.

When I was at university I came across a Chinese writer called Watchman Nee, and I was reminded of him today because of Ezekiel's call to be a watchman. In his published testimony, Watchman Nee writes how a Western missionary asked him how many people he had brought to the Lord in the year following his salvation. She also asked how he went about sharing his faith.

His response was that he pulled people in at random and began to speak, regardless of whether they were listening or not. She said, "This is not right. You must speak to God first, before you speak to people. You should pray to God, make a list of your schoolmates' names, and ask God which of them you should pray for. Pray for them daily, mentioning them by name. Then when God affords the opportunity, you should bear testimony to them."

He entered the names of about seventy schoolmates in a notebook and began praying for them daily, mentioning their names individually before God. Sometimes he prayed for them once every hour, praying silently, even in class. When opportunity arose, he would try to persuade them to believe in the Lord Jesus. His schoolmates often said jokingly, "Mr. Preacher is coming. Let's listen to his preaching." The fact was that they had no intention of listening.

When nothing seemed to be happening he went back to the missionary and said, "I have fully carried out your instructions. Why is it not effective?" She replied, "Do not be disappointed. Keep praying until some are saved." He continued to pray daily. When opportunity arose, he told them about Jesus. After several months, all but one of the seventy people whose names were in his notebook had become Christians.

What an encouragement to pray, and to pray consistently! This is something that each one of us can do. We may not know 70 people to pray for, but could I invite you to pray for just one, consistently. Who knows what difference that could make?!

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