

Ezekiel 37. 15-end Evensong @ Westminster Abbey. 25.9.11

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit . Amen

I really should have known better than to goggle Ezekiel!

Did you know that he allegedly had encounters with spaceships?

Oh yes! Apparently this guy reckons that verse 13 of the very first chapter of the book is an accurate description of extra –terrestrial helicopters: ‘their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were round; and they sparkled like burnished bronze.’

According to St Google he may also have suffered from a rare type of epilepsy called Geschwind syndrome -one of the symptoms being hyper religiosity.

Take all that with a pinch of salt if you wish -the fact remains that a simple reading of the text reveals a rather weird bloke -with obsessive compulsive tendencies - who had an extraordinary capacity to see deeper than the surface -to read, deeply what was going on, and what that might mean in terms of the people’s relationship with God.

We call people like that prophets. Not specifically telling us about the future, more exposing deep truth. It’s not a great job because there is this human tendency to shoot the messenger.

Today’s text begins when Ezekiel has just experienced the dry bones vision -fabulatioous images - rich, many layered – full of potential for interpretation -then God says: ‘These bones are the whole house of Israel’ Dried up, not moving, -well- dead basically.

The vision ends well. God promises to sort it – breathe the breath of life -but then comes the rub.

If Israel wants to live, it needs to become one nation again. Mend the split. These two sticks need to get joined together -one nation under one king.

As an analysis of the human condition this is right on the money.

Where to start?

Well -think of yourself. When you are conflicted internally you can’t perform. You are at risk of depression. The same applies when there is a lack of congruence between what you believe and how you behave.

A friend of mine was a senior Heath Serviced manager and constantly having to justify in public decisions about cuts and the like that she didn't believe in. She became quiet and withdrawn and in the end she chucked it in for a lesser job, but one she did believe in.

The same applies to the way a country functions. When you vote for a government which preaches equality and fairness but you experience systems and a class structure that means you never feel there is a level playing field -that lack of unity begins to cause society to fragment and loose self-confidence -and you are along the road to that quintessential expression of depression -anger.

You may or may not feel that is what is happening here at the moment.

Painfully enough we also need to look at the Church. Not only does the degree of splitting within the church severely limit it's efficacy, but, let's be honest, in the eyes of many folk it simply makes it look foolish and irrelevant. I'm standing here as a woman priest -there are some folk - only a few, who find that unacceptable. In a couple of years time we will have women bishops -and again a small number of people have left the church at the very thought.

In a church that preaches equality and inclusivity there are sadly still those who treat anyone with a different sexual orientation from theirs as aliens -and unwelcome ones at that. Not only do we behave appallingly, but we are seen as being far more concerned with our own internal splits than with the really big issues of peace and justice.

Ezekiel saw it then and we ought to be able to see it now. A house divided against itself will fall.

As with the individual so with the institution -splitting leads to depression.

The whole institution is exhausted and defensive.

To be frank much of the Church of England is in a mess at the moment. While in other parts of the world the church is growing wonderfully and vigorously, here there is a feeling of having to fan the dying embers.

Now if you really want to push the image it's worth mentioning that Ezekiel is also a prophet in Islam -and the really big story here might be about humanity being divided against itself. One prophet speaking truth to two traditions -the same truth -but to people who are murdering each other.

The hope that Ezekiel holds before the divided Jews is the day when he says: 'They will be my people and I will be their God.'

He speaks of reconciliation -and what he says is a foretaste of the incarnation -when Christ came to reconcile all things to himself.

This sounds so idealistic and unachievable. – Of course we want reconciliation -but we simply find it too hard. We even sometimes choose death rather than reconciliation.

St Paul describes this vividly -this internal conflict we all live with:

He says: ‘I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad but then I do it anyway.....I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no-one who can do anything for me?’

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.’ (Romans 7.19)

We can easily forget how radical Jesus’ message actually is. Doing good to those who hate you, loving your enemies. This isn’t wishy-washy - it’s the one and only hope for humanity which is destroying itself by being divided. It probably starts with the need to forgive yourself -love the part of you that you have labelled your enemy.

Jesus didn’t just preach this -he lived and died it. He did not retaliate, or escalate. He forgave the very people who were murdering him.

His was a death of reconciliation -and that way is life -is resurrection - is hope -eternal hope.

I don’t know if you need to make peace with yourself today. I do know that as a church, mending divisions would bring new life and hope. I suspect that mending divisions in our society is just as necessary - before we can thrive again.

In a world where we are all encouraged to stand up for ourselves, fight our corner, never admit you’re wrong or show any weakness, this call for reconciliation is counter-cultural -but there is a collective malaise and depression around which threatens to overwhelm us. By choosing to mend what is divided, amazingly, and sometimes life-threateningly difficult though it may be -by choosing that way you are choosing the way of Christ, the way of hope and the way of life.

Amen