

“Hope, Dreams and Visions: The Spirit for Tomorrow”

Sermon preached on May 31 2009

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Acts 2:1-21

Bill Simon did not have a normal childhood. Removed from his family, he found himself in the notorious Kinchela Boys Home. There he was told his mother did not want him, that he was the “scum of the earth”. His experience of living in Kinchela where he was deprived of his freedom, beaten and used as child labour has shaped the rest of his life. Bill Simon was an angry young aboriginal man over the next two decades. He experienced the depths in a life of self-abuse and crime that finally saw him in prison. And yet Bill Simon was introduced to Jesus Christ and with the power of the Holy Spirit his life has turned around. Indeed today he is a pastor on the Block in Redfern (1).

Ezekiel also found himself where he did not want to be and against his will. Ezekiel was a prophet who lived in the 6th Century Before Christ at the time the Hebrew leaders were taken into exile in Babylon. The Hebrews were not imprisoned in gaols or camps. In fact they were able to make a life for themselves – to work, grow crops, marry and build homes and set up businesses. Some prospered but the bottom line was that they couldn't go home. It was a time of great sadness: Many could not sing the Lord's song in that foreign land. Many lost their vision of God. The years went by and the dream of ever going home to their land of origin became more and more remote so they started to numb their spiritual pain with other things: They worked hard and they collected and surrounded themselves with lots of things. Many were comfortable materially and it helped to compensate and deadened the pain and yet they were somehow dying “from the inside out”(2).

And as the years continued to pass in Babylon, many of the Hebrew exiles lost their old dream of living in covenantal relationship with God and of returning home to Jerusalem. You could say that beneath the relatively comfortable life they had created for themselves in Babylon, they were spiritually dead.

It was in this context that the Spirit of God got hold of Ezekiel and gave him this vision of a wide shallow valley filled with human dry bones. Dry, wind-blown, sand-blasted bones: There is nothing so dead. As Australians we are familiar with pictures of the dried bones of animals in the desert and there is no image in a drought that speaks more of desolation and hopelessness than the skeleton of a sheep or a cow.

In Ezekiel's vision, the bones are a potent symbol of a people whose hope has died. Standing there amongst the bones, Ezekiel knows there is no possibility of them returning to life – unless..... and the answer lies with God – unless God acts.

And in his vision, Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones –to preach to them! How ridiculous he must have felt speaking out to a paddock of dead bones! But he does. Ezekiel does what God asks of him and he delivers God's message of hope to the bones – the message that God will make them live – that God will enter them and breathe the breath of life into them and makes them strong and whole. And as the prophet Ezekiel speaks these words of hope he watches the dry bones reconnect with an almighty clatter and come back to life with sinew and flesh , then skin and finally the breath as the bodies are restored. And as he beholds the amazing scene, God says there is *the whole house of Israel* – both those in exile and those who remain under occupation back in the homeland together restored –alive – filled with the Spirit of God.

Ezekiel's vision is about hope. God's words which Ezekiel speaks "I am now going to make breath enter you and you will live" creates room for hope. It acknowledges that these bones are dead but it will not always be like this. And so this vision which Ezekiel shared with his people gave them hope. It spoke to the spiritual longings buried deep within them – it evoked their whispered yearnings and despite the reality of their lives in Babylon, it brought them back to life (1).

That is how it is with hope: when we turn our backs on the future because we believe that nothing will change or nothing should change or that we are on a downward spiral that we cannot stop –there is no hope and our spirits wither.

On the other hand, a vision of a new tomorrow is life-giving: Hope is life-giving . That's why Martin Luther King's great speech "I have a dream" continues to raise the hairs on the back of people's necks and why President Obama's refrain "O Yes we can!" is so powerful. Hope does not allow us to set the present in concrete as the way things should always be. It propels us towards tomorrow.

Friends the Holy Spirit of God gives us the freedom to hope; the freedom to dream and have visions.Why? Because it breaks down the bonds and the barriers and attitudes that hold us back and oppress us and confine us and paralyse us (3). The Holy Spirit is the powerful presence of God who is life.

And so it is in our dramatic Acts story of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in Jerusalem. This is the amazing story of how the disciples' experience the powerful presence of the gift of the Spirit of God – an

experience that was so vivid and amazing and transforming that it could only be described using symbols of fire and wind.

Last week we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus and when Jesus left his disciples he made it clear that it was not the end of the story. Indeed Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to empower them to go out into the world and continue the story by telling the good news about what he had done for them. They were to be entrusted and they were to be enabled to continue the ministry of Jesus (3).

And so when the Holy Spirit comes upon the followers of Jesus gathered behind closed doors in that room with a force like fire and wind it transforms them from a frightened bunch of people to bold preachers of the Gospel – it changes them from people who don't know what to say to people who know exactly what to say.

And the power of this Spirit sweeps them out from the house into the open to engage with the crowd that gathers to see what is happening – a crowd composed of Jews from all the nations of the known world gathered for the Pentecost festival. The effect of the Spirit on the disciples, as it was in Ezekiel's vision, is to bring new life; to create room for something new to happen that looks towards the future. Let's look at that effect more closely (3):

Firstly the Holy Spirit cut through the barriers of language that makes communication difficult and keeps people apart. Strangers and foreigners heard what the disciples were saying in their own languages. And the result was that many believed in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and were baptized and the church was born.

Secondly, filled with the Spirit the members of this early church has a whole change of life-style and they formed a new community in which members lived in close fellowship sharing their belonging so that no-one had need. They met regularly for worship and prayer and the breaking of bread; living out the values of the Kingdom of God that Jesus had taught.

And thirdly filled with the Spirit the followers of Jesus had new confidence and power to do things they never dreamt of. The future was opened up.

What a wonderful vision we have today then in Ezekiel and in Acts of new life coming out of the death, of hope out of hopelessness, of people being changed and empowered to be the people God calls them to be, of the barriers that separate people being broken down and community being formed. No wonder Peter ecstatic with hope invoked the prophecy of Joel who speaks of a day when God would pour his Spirit like water out of some

sort of giant jug - on all humanity so that sons and daughters speak out the word of God, young people see visions, and old people dream dreams.

And friends, this why we press on with great anticipation: For just when we settle into a comfortable way of being even compensating for the pain and for what is missing in our lives as the Hebrews in Babylon did and when we think that we have done our bit and the best is behind us, the Spirit unsettles us and inspires us because God is not finished. That is true through out our personal lives, our congregational lives, our wider church's life and in the community, the nation, the world.

This week in our church life and our national life, two visions have been given prominence:

The first was celebrated in worship last week when the local churches got together at St Luke's Presbyterian Church for a Service of Prayer for Christian Unity. I commend to you the sermon that His Honour Judge Christ Armitage from St Martin's Anglican Church Killara delivered on that occasion. There are some copies in the foyer and it is an excellent biblical analysis of why there is much still to be done in ecumenism. Today on Pentecost Sunday we remember that it is the Holy Spirit that brings us together. It is the Holy Spirit which is love and healing that is the glue of Christian community and compels us to continue to seek unity even in our diversity of traditions and experiences.

The second is that this is National Reconciliation Week in Australia (4) – a week that focuses upon relationships between indigenous and non—indigenous Australians. According to Reconciliation Australia the vision is for “a truly united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and works for justice and equity for all”. People of faith are called to help shape this vision and bring it into being and we have a role here. We cannot speak of Christ's mission of reconciliation and ignore those who are still hurting.

Pastor Bill Simon (1) has a dream and a vision: These days Bill, having experienced the reconciliation and love and grace of Jesus Christ, is helping others to do the same. He has written a book called *Back on the block* which he hopes will help others through the telling of the truth about life in one of Australia's most controversial juvenile institutions where thousands of boys were abused. And he now works in prisons, and is helping angry members of the Stolen Generation to find a voice and their place of belonging and healing. He works on the streets in Redfern and his home is a drop-in centre for anyone in need.

Why does he persist? Why do we persist? Why do we persist in working for peace and caring for people in the Middle East, Sri Lanka and other places where hope has run dry ?

Why do we support orphanages far away in Zimbabwe and North Korea and Russia? Why do we sign petitions and lobby government and think carefully about our vote even when there is a mood of cynicism regarding politics?

Why do care for this planet which we share?

Why do we visit in hospitals? Why are we at Roseville committed to the dream of religious education in Chatswood high school and our youth ministries of Spark and Switch?

Why is it important to offer new ways of worship in our church programme?

Because the Holy Spirit reminds us that God is still at work in our world – what is today is not God’s last word.

The God of Ezekiel says “Arise”, you who are tired and discouraged, and allow the Spirit to breathe new life into you.

The God of Pentecost says Step out, be bold and I will empower you and give you the words to share the Good News of Jesus Christ which is for everyone.

The Holy Spirit comes and breathes new life within us and makes us free to dream and have visions and to realize them – to be people of hope. Thanks be to God!

Rev Laurel Barr

Resources

(1) *Back on the Block, Bill Simon’s Story*

www.aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal_studies_press/find_a_book/recent_releases

(2) Craig Barnes “Resurrected Hopes (Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11)”, *The Christian Century February 27-March 6 2002* p.20)

(3) Lis Mullen, *Pentecost- the feast of liberation*, Sermon for Pentecost day B, MAY 24 2009, <http://lectionary.wolsblog.com>

(4) “May 27-June 3- National Reconciliation Week”, in *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Lent-Easter 2009*, -128

(5) Howard Wallace, Year B: Pentecost, May 31 2009, Ezekiel 37:1-14, hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au

(6) William Loader, Pentecost, First Thoughts on Year B Epistle Passages from the lectionary, wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader