

Can you tell when you are supporting a lost cause?

Perhaps you've been a faithful supporter of Torquay United or Oldham Athletic, now a non-league team, and watched their gradual relegation through the leagues? When do you decide to call it a day? When there's no manager, no team? Or perhaps you've campaigned for a political party, only to see its poll ratings plummet, and lose all local and national influence? At what point do you say, "enough is enough"?

Hiroo Onada was a Second Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps of the Imperial Japanese army. He spent 29 years on Lubang island, in the Philippines, leading a small squad of 3 other soldiers: they persisted in guerilla raids against the enemy - and did not believe any of the



leaflets telling them that the war was over - they saw the first one in October 1945, and more were dropped in 1950 and 1952. One soldier gave up in 1949, another was killed in 1954, and the another in 1972. Onada was finally persuaded to surrender by a Japanese man in 1974, who brought his old commanding Officer, Major Taniguchi to assure him that the war was really over.

Perhaps you read my "Call to Lament for the Church of England", or had already decided that it is a lost cause - time to give up faith, or look for another church. Please don't do either, but let's learn from the scriptures and the prophet Ezekiel, that God's Church is never a lost cause, that Christ will reign, though not necessarily in the way that we had been expecting or hoping.

Turn with me to the **book of Ezekiel**. If you've never read it, it's weird - full of strange signs and visions, but the background is clear enough. Ezekiel was born 622BC to a priestly family in Jerusalem: he would have been trained to become a Temple priest, sacrificing animals, conducting rituals, teaching people, but in 597BC before he was old enough to be ordained (at 30) he was deported from Jerusalem to the Capital of the Babylonian Empire by King Nebuchadnezzar, along with 10,000 others. In 592, when he should have started his priestly ministry, the Lord called him to become a prophet, with a series of revelations 'in the valley', with a message to the exiles in Babylon: stop hoping that God is going to send you home and restore Jerusalem to be an independent kingdom. God is not going to rescue you: he is judging you for your wickedness!

The message was not popular, but Ezekiel persevered with signs and sermons for 5 years (described in chapters 1-24) until finally in 587 BC, Jerusalem was besieged and completely destroyed by the Babylonians. The exiles got the message: “we’re finished - happy now, Ezekiel?”

But Ezekiel, and God, wasn’t finished with the exiles. They were saying Ezk 37.11 **‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’**

So the Lord speaks a new message through his servant- a vision so vivid it could be real.

The Scene: Ezekiel is carried back by the Spirit to the valley of vision where he had seen God’s glory, only now the valley is full of bones - dead, dry, picked clean by the vultures of all meat and flesh. Ezekiel was trained as a priest in sacrificing animals - a sacred butcher - but he



was not allowed to touch human bones, or a corpse- that was unclean. This whole valley is unclean. Worse these bones are unburied. Perhaps there has been a battle,, and the winners didn’t give their enemies the courtesy, the duty of burial. In most ancient belief systems, that is bad news - the spirit is not at rest till the body is buried. For Jews, the lack of burial is a sign of something worse: they are under the curse of God. For the LORD said that if the people of Israel persisted in disobeying him, they would be cursed. Then the LORD asks Ezekiel a question.

Have you noticed that God often does this? Adam, where are you? Cain, where is your brother? Isaiah, whom shall I send? Job, did you see me create the universe? Jesus asked the disciples questions: Where shall we buy bread to feed 5000? The LORD is not looking for information from ignorance - he knows the answer, but he invites us into his plan - to recognised our sin, our weakness, and to confess our faith.

So the Lord asks Ezekiel: **Son of Man, can these bones live?**

(Son of Man- here simply means ‘mortal, son of Adam’)

From a human perspective the answer is clearly No. But this is the LORD speaking, so Ezekiel answers with great wisdom and some faith:

“O Lord GOD, you know.”

There were hints in the Old Testament that God can raise the dead: Elijah and Elisha both brought back to life a young child who had just died. The prophets say: “The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.” (1 Sam 2, Deut 32.39)

But there was also a widespread view that once you die, you go to Sheol and that is probably it. Once the bones are picked dry, what hope? Can God raise a whole dead army, who are cursed?

“O Lord GOD, you know.”

What question does the LORD ask us, when the cause is lost, when our hope is gone.

Do you still care? Dare you hope?

Do you care that everything we loved and valued about the dear old C of E, its buildings, liturgy, music, presence in every parish, is fading away? Do you care that countless millions of our fellow citizens have no faith, no hope for the future? Do you care that God’s name is not honoured hallowed, but simply a swear word?

Do you dare to hope that God might actually still keep his promise to build his kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven? Then answer the question with wisdom, and as much faith as you can muster:

“O Lord God, you know”

POINT TWO: The Command: Prophecy to these bones.

The Lord gives Ezekiel words to speak- the word of the Lord. To prophesy is to preach God’s word, not necessarily to tell the future. The faithful prophet and the effective preacher does not need to improve or edit the word of God, to embellish God’s word with stories and jokes.

Preaching to bones sounds like a waste of time. Ezekiel had been warned in the first phase of his ministry not to expect good results:

““Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.” (Ezek 2.3-5)

Isaiah was told to preach and expect no response:

““Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6.9-10) words which Jesus himself quoted. And Jesus taught us the parable of the sower to prepare us to expect many not to respond even to the gospel message. But here Ezekiel is given no reason to expect failure. So Ezekiel obeys. And as he speaks, there was a rattling and shaking and the bones came together, and flesh and skin and sinew covered them. Ezekiel knew animal anatomy: he had stripped skin and sinew and flesh from many bones. But he’d never seen the process in reverse. We are used to Computer-generated special effects, but the image is still vivid and disturbing. Ezekiel preaches, the bodies now lie together, but they are still dead.

Have you ever tried sharing your faith, or preaching a sermon? Perhaps nervously, perhaps with skill and sensitivity you shared who Jesus is, what he

has done for us on the cross, and how we must respond with faith and repentance - and nothing happened. This is one of the mysteries of evangelism. The people we love and long to reach are spiritually unable to respond on their own. Only God can shine the light of truth into dark hearts and bring the spiritually dead to new life and new birth.

So Ezekiel is commanded to preach again- this time to the wind or the breath.

“Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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.’ ” (Ezek 37.9)

We need to remember that there is only one word in Hebrew for Wind, and Breath, and Spirit - ‘ruach’-and in Greek pneuma. This life-force or breath is ultimately the Spirit of God.

Why does God tell the prophet to command his own Spirit to do his work? It is an invitation to pray: to ask God - command God- to keep his promises, and do the work that He alone can do.

We need to preach the gospel to our generation, even though it feels hard, but we must always do so with prayer that God will open hearts and minds and grant new life. It reminds us of the way in Genesis 2.7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. There were two steps at creation - forming and breathing, and there are two steps here in resurrection. We should pray before we speak, and pray for opportunities to speak, and for the Spirit to stir us to speak. Jesus told the disciples at his Ascension to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came, and they prayed continuously for 10 days before Pentecost. Others have prayed for years for friends and family, for churches and nations to be revived. Isaiah 62.6 says:

“You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.”

When Ezekiel prays, the Spirit comes and a mighty army stood up. This is what God is calling forth- not new congregations to fill our church pews and programmes, but an army terrible with banners to build his kingdom, yet not in the same way that the Israelites had taken the promised land under Joshua and David: never again was military strength to be the means of extending the kingdom. Henceforth it is the power of the gospel:

“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,” (2 Cor 10.4).

POINT FOUR: The Promise Then the Lord reveals the meaning of this vision. It is an unconditional promise. It does not await the repentance of Israel. For the dead cannot do anything towards their resurrection. It is a pure act of grace. The exiles cannot do anything to recover their homes far away. They are lost, slaves, doomed to die far from home- dead men walking, and they know it.

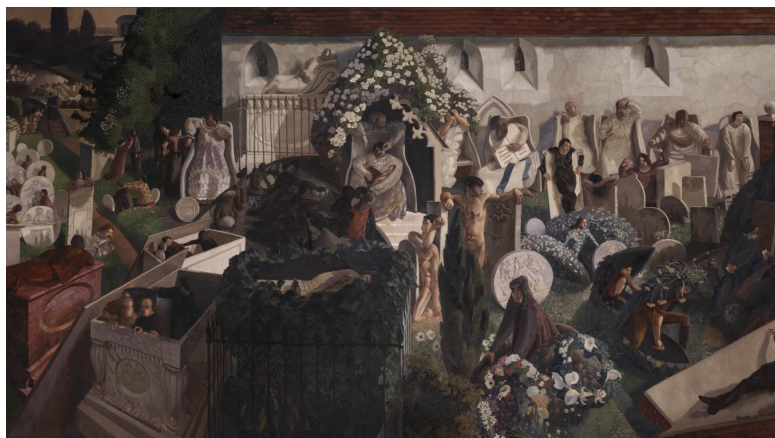
37.11 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.'

But the Lord declares:

"Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD." (Ezek 37.12-13)

There seem to be two stages to this great work. First he will bring them to life - to spiritual life, and then he will bring them home. We do not know how quickly people responded to Ezekiel's message, but we do know that they responded, for in 539BC King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and gave the exiles permission to go home

and rebuild the temple. And there were 42,360 exiles ready and eager to do so (according to Ezra 2). Those exiles had kept the faith and waited for that moment for 48 years. Ezekiel himself would have been 78 - probably too old to travel, but they believed his message, rejected despair and began to pray. Some lived to see their children and grandchildren

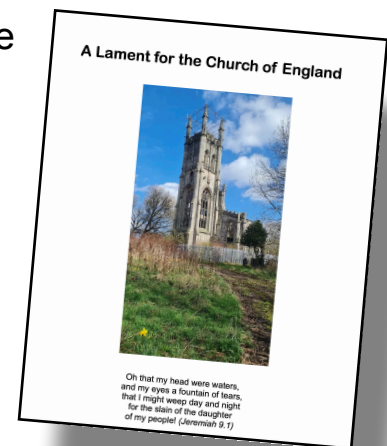


return. The exiles in Babylon could not worship or sacrifice in the true temple, but they prayed earnestly, and they studied the scriptures. The Jews began to keep the Law and reject idolatry as they had never done before, led by scribes like Ezra.

If you remember, the bones in the valley were loose, unclean, unburied, but here God promises to raise them from their graves. This prophecy points beyond the return from exile for a future generation, to a homecoming and resurrection hope for us all, Jew and Gentile, living and departed, the fulfilment of God's great promise to Abraham, achieved through Jesus Christ. This painting by Stanley Spencer imagines the day of resurrection in a country churchyard

Jesus, raised from the dead, stood in the upper room and breathed on his disciples: receive the Holy Spirit. He commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations, to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. At Pentecost the Spirit blew and Jews from every nation heard and wondered at the sound of the wind. Peter preached the words he had been given. "This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ", and a mighty movement began that has still not finished, and still grows around the world.

So how do we respond? In my **“Call to lament”** ([downloadable from the church website](#)) I have suggested that we may have reached a point of no return for the Church of England, and it is right to lament the good things that are being lost, but we are not called to despair and give up on faith and on God. God’s promise stands: at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. God may even renew the Church of England . I have found a little booklet produced by Church Society (“Gospel Flourishing in a time of confusion”) very helpful in encouraging us to stand firm and contend for the gospel. Whatever happens to the C ofE, the gospel will be preached to all creation, and we have a part in that great mission. Like Ezekiel we must preach, perhaps first to a stubborn and rebellious house, a generation that does not, cannot believe that things are changing, that will not repent of its unfaithfulness. And we must preach to those who have never heard of Jesus. But above all we must pray, not a quick collect today, but daily, for years and for decades to come. Perhaps some of the young people in our fellowship may live to see a wonderful restoration and revival. Hiroo Onada stayed faithful to the (wrong) cause for 29 years: can we not endure for as long as it takes? We do not need to know the time or manner. When the Lord asks us, “Can these dry bones live?” let’s be ready to answer - Lord, you know! Let us trust the LORD to keep his promise, repent of our sin and lack of prayer, and join with Ezekiel in preaching to the bones and to praying to the Spirit. “O breath of life, come sweeping through us!”



Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Rev Graham Hamilton
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