

## Thoughts on Ezekiel 37 v 1-14

Although many of us have been trying to stay cheerful these last few days as we moved into the surreal and sudden world of social lockdown, it would only be natural if at times we experienced despair, bewilderment and anxiety.

Someone said to me that they felt they were in a movie – not a very pleasant one- that they hoped they would wake up from very soon.

Despite the new way of living imposed by the corona virus outbreak, there has, too, been a great outpouring of caring in the UK – and I'm sure globally – as people have wanted to make sure that the more vulnerable in society are looked after and kept safe. The response to the call for people to volunteer to back up the NHS has been outstanding – and our thanks to those volunteers and of course to the magnificent army of NHS personnel who are on the front line of giving care to those who fall ill.

When Ezekiel wrote this passage, 500 years before Jesus lived on the earth, he lived in a time of great challenge for the Jewish people.

During his lifetime, the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the building so dear to them, the Temple, their place of worship, had been raised to the ground as well.

The Babylonian army had wiped out the Israelite army and those surviving were dragged off into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel, a priest and prophet, was among the exiles who felt helpless and abandoned by God.

Although in the past, he had warned the Israelites about their sinful living, in this enforced exile, he began to offer a message of hope.

He could see God at work even in times of despair and looked forward to the restoration of his people in their own land and with a renewed relationship, or covenant with God.

In the passage we heard, he presents a powerful image of dead bones coming to life to emphasise that God's spirit would indeed raise his people to new life.

We don't have to look very far to see some parallels in our own situation.

With towns and cities in lockdown, it can feel that places have been abandoned and the usual, pulsating life that would normally be there has gone.

It can feel that something we can't see, or control has forced us into exile – an exile not of our own making but one enforced on us out of the blue. We long to be back fully occupying our own space in freedom and delight.

We might be trying to work out why this is happening. Have we as human beings been sinful, been greedy, brought this upon ourselves – or is it just bad luck and we have to live with these outbreaks as best we can?

The exile of the Jewish people eventually came to an end when the Persian King Cyrus the great defeated the Babylonians in 539BC and most of the exiled Jews were permitted to return to Judah.

Work to build their second temple began c 537 BC.

At the moment, we just don't know how long it will be before we and peoples across the world will return to normal living, our battered economies begin to revive, and we can hug and dance and sing together and meet together without worrying who might be infected.

But we must have HOPE. Ezekiel preached a message of hope when he wrote about his vision of the valley of the dry bones. God will revive his people. New life will come flowing back, fear will cease and life in all its abundance will again be our gift to enjoy and nurture.

Whether we are able to be out and about helping others safely and responsibly, or whether we are based at home and need support, may be all pray for and imagine that day when new life is breathed into communities across the world.

This may not all be over by Easter, but we can look forward to the uplifting message that Jesus overcame despair and anxiety and darkness when he rose from the dead on the first Easter morning. His great legacy to us is this gift of hope that we, too, as a human race will overcome all that confronts us these Lenten days. Amen.