

Sermon on Sunday 22 May at St Andrew's

By Maria Henriksson-Bell, Lay Leader of Worship

Readings: Acts 16:9-15 & John 5:1-9

What is the worst feeling?

Is it anger? Fear? Or maybe envy? Or is it that sinking feeling of realising you have no crisps whatsoever in the house? Maybe that one is just me...

Quite high on my list is that wide-awake-at-night feeling of realising that in a few days I'll be speaking in front of the best part of a hundred people when suffering from a near total writer's block and struggling to prepare.

And so begun my, one-sided, argument with God:

"Dear God, it is Monday, please can I have some inspiration now."

"Dear God, I really, really want to know what on Earth I'm supposed to share. It is Tuesday."

"Dear God, if I'm still supposed to speak on Sunday, then will you speak to me. Please. It is Wednesday."

It was, of course, an exercise in missing the point, in several ways. Deliberately looking for inspiration, divine or other, is about as fruitful as trying to deliberately spot a kingfisher. You can walk up and down the river trying to see this bird but, most often, you won't see it until you stop looking. And, all of a sudden, in the corner of your eye you'll see a distinctive flutter of bright blue.

On Thursday, I stopped looking. And in the corner of my eye, I began to catch glimpses of ideas and images. But, most importantly, I was reminded that whatever I conjure up as a problem, God has it in hand. God has so far never left me in the lurch.

There are things that are unresolved in my life, in all our lives. There are things that never will be resolved in this life, but I choose to believe that somehow, some day, in some realm they will be resolved.

This faith in the redemption of all things was the Gospel St Paul shared with Lydia and her congregation. The Gospel, the story of Jesus, teaches us that there will be suffering in this life and much of it won't make any sense. We'll have those awful ups and downs; the anger, the fear, the envy, the lack of crisps and the dark nights of the soul, but that is not the end of the story.

Often, when we take a leap of faith, God does provide. I was desperate for a sermon for today and, on Friday, I realised, to my great relief, that I already had material from weeks ago that I was told was helpful. So, I'll share these words again; they are words I shared on the 23rd of April at the 8 o'clock service.

The Gospel reading was from the book of John, chapter 20, where the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples who have locked themselves away, in fear.

The Old Testament reading for that day was from Ezekiel 37. 1-10, where God shows the prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley full of dry bones that God breathes over until they begin to flesh out and come to life.

Without further ado, here's one I prepared earlier. May God bless what is said and what is heard.

When the sun shines, when the trees are in blossom and the days are longer, we usually have a bit more of a spring in our steps than in the bleak of winter and, yet, by far the most common experience of the last few years seems to have been tiredness. Those who have been unwell with the dreaded virus often speak of a lingering tiredness or outright fatigue, and the sheer strangeness and uncertainty of the last couple of years, coupled with global unrest on many levels, has caused us all to, if not constantly then at least intermittently, feel really, really tired. World-weary. Bone tired.

Ezekiel's vision of dry bones strikes me as an image for the deep sort of weariness many of us have been overcome with when faced with humanity's many, many challenges; personal, political and global.

The ancient Hebrews to whom Ezekiel is prophesying are at a frightening turn of their history. Like millions of refugees in our time, they have been forced into exile, living in a foreign land, cut off from much that is familiar.

The religious rules of the Hebrews stipulated that the sacrifices they made to please and commune with God must only take place in the Temple. The Temple had been razed to the ground. Without temple or sacrifices they would have struggled to hold on to their identity as God's chosen people.

And in this situation, Ezekiel has his vision. This a delightfully Gothic image of bones coming to life, being fleshed out and raised to life again. "Dem bones, dem bones..." sang the Delta Rhythm Boys. These dry bones were of course symbols of the withered hope of the Israelites and God goes on to reassure them, through Ezekiel, that they would once again return home; hope, land and future restored.

Time and time again, we are reminded that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to this kind of human suffering. We see millions of people displaced by wars, famine or other disasters; their homes, like Jerusalem, destroyed. Nevertheless, we too can take comfort from the vision of Ezekiel and the idea of resurrection and new life.

It is easy to think that the dark forces of our world are winning, but if the Easter story teaches us anything it is that darkness, war and cruelty are only temporary. It is light, peace and goodness that wins. It might just take a while.

The disciples in the Gospel reading were most likely at this stage of doubt. They had heard Christ was risen but they

also knew that the bodily Jesus they had known was no longer to stay with them. He appears to them one last time, but he doesn't leave them helpless. He gives them his peace. He leaves them with a reassurance that things will work out, that the Holy Spirit will still be at work and the Holy Spirit is still at work. Vividly.

When we feel profound discomfort with lies and corruption, when we feel sorrow over man's inhumanity to man, and feel angry at injustice, The Holy Spirit is breathing over our dried up bones to strengthen us into working for peace and justice, for a warm welcome to the stranger, towards loving our neighbour and our enemy.

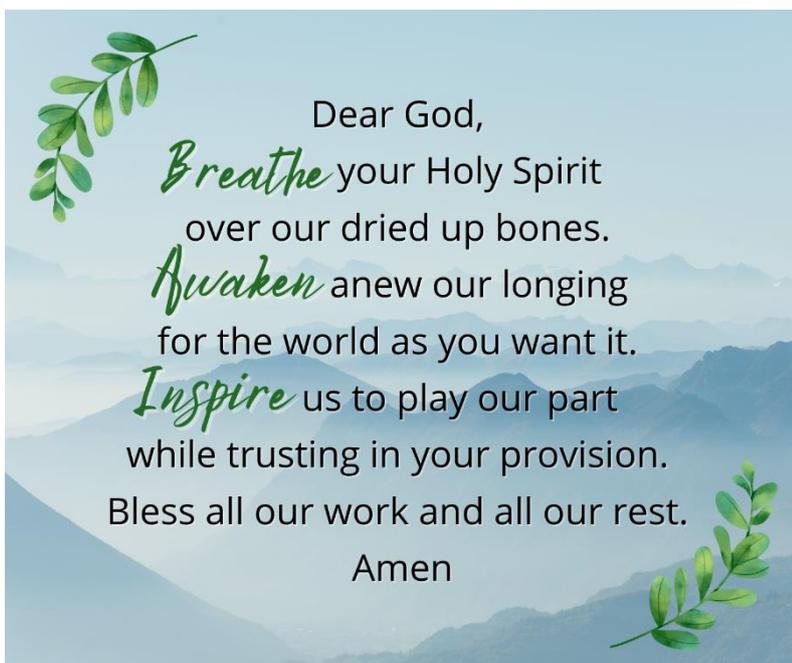
"We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice," said the Reverend Martin Luther King - and we are invited to join in with healing and mending this broken world.

And yet, it is hard to do anything if we are tired. Even Jesus had to draw away from people to rest before continuing his mission; it is not selfish, it is necessary to rest and recuperate when we need it.

I came across a list of nine types of rest which I want to share because I found it useful and know others have, too. Resting isn't always simply being still. I often find myself physically exhausted but mentally rested after gardening, for instance. I highly recommend taking time to think through what your best way of resting is. Here are some suggestions:

Nine types of rest:

1. time away
2. permission to not be helpful
3. doing something “unproductive”
4. appreciating art and nature
5. alone time to recharge
6. a break from responsibility
7. stillness to decompress
8. safe space
9. alone time at home



Let us pray:

*Dear God, breathe
your Holy Spirit over
our dried up bones.
Awaken anew our
longing for the world
as you want it.
Inspire us to play our
part while trusting in
your provision. Bless
all our work and all
our rest. Amen*

