

VALLEY OF THE DRY BONES – EZEKIEL

I was in Rotterdam three weeks ago,  
 when President of Turkey, Mr  
 Erdogan, reminded the Dutch people  
 of the shame that was Srebinica – and  
 the Dutch forces who failed singularly  
 to stop  
 the killing of hundreds of young men –  
 who were herded together –shot and  
 buried without ceremony in mass  
 graves...

Years later, their bones were dug up  
 by investigators, the extent of the  
 crime made clear for the world to see.  
 When I was 44...living in Dunbar...early  
 that summer...it happened...

OTHERS HAD DONE IT BEFORE...BUT  
 THE 20<sup>TH</sup> C. WAS SURELY *THE*  
 CENTURY OF MASS KILLINGS...!!

We've all seen the grainy newsreel  
 pictures...

The discovery of Belsen or Auschwitz –  
 the full horror of  
 HOLOCAUST – mountainous PILES OF  
 BONES..

Not many years later the Killing fields  
 of Cambodia  
 POL POT – neat rows of skulls and  
 skeletons...telling who knows what  
 grim tale of terror and slaughter...

Throw in

STALIN'S PURGES

MAO'S BRUTAL REVOLUTIONS

RWANDA AND IT'S GENOCIDE

AND Srebrinica WITH ITS LIME-FILLED  
 MASS GRAVES

Isis have their own mass graves at a  
 place called...a convenient sink hole  
 into which were thrown the bodies of  
 hundreds if not thousands of  
 slaughtered victims...

And, so, we discover that we know all  
 about bones,  
 and corpses and chilling human  
 tragedy made worse  
 by appalling human cruelty...

Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is terrible  
 familiar territory for us  
 moderns...we've seen plenty of them...  
 WE'VE SEEN THE PHOTOGRAPHS  
 THE VIVID IMAGES SHROUD AND  
 SHAME OUR LIFE AND TIMES...

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WHAT DID IT MEAN FOR ISRAEL...THIS  
 POWERFUL METAPHOR FOR A NATION  
 IN CRISIS? THIS TERRIBLE VALLEY  
 PILED HIGH WITH DRY BONES?

EZEKIEL'S VISIONS SPOKE WITH RAW  
 TRUTH ABOUT  
 EXILE –  
 DISINTEGRATION...ANNIHILATION...  
 A ONCE GREAT PEOPLE ON THE VERGE  
 OF BEING

DESTROYED COMPLETELY BY THE  
 RELENTLESS MARCH OF HISTORY...  
 SWALLOWED UP BY THE GREAT  
 EMPYRES THAT BESTRODE THE  
 ANCIENT WORLD...  
 BRUSHED ASIDE BY THIS ARMY OR  
 THAT...  
 AND WORST OF ALL – TAKEN EN  
 MASSE INTO EXILE –  
 SO THAT ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF THEIR  
 NATION...

THEIR IDENTITY, THEIR RELIGION...  
 WERE MOSS-COVERED RUINS,  
 BROKEN BUILDINGS  
 AND SHATTERED DREAMS...

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THIS IS THE FATE THAT AWAITED  
 THEM...  
 TIME WOULD PASS.  
 THEY WOULD BE ABSORBED INTO  
 OTHER CULTURES

AND THEIR UNIQUENESS AND  
 IDENTITY AND FAITH WOULD  
 SIMPLY....DISAPPEAR...

THIS WAS THEIR PROBLEM...

A HOPELESS SITUATION..

AND,  
 WHAT WAS THEIR VISION, THEIR  
 HOPE?

THE TRUTH IS - THERE WAS NONE.  
 REALITY OFFERED NO POSSIBILITY, NO  
 HOPE.

ONCE THE NATION HAD BEEN TORN  
 UP BY ITS ROOTS –  
 THERE WAS NO WAY BACK...  
 EVER.

ENTER EZEKIEL...

AND *HIS* PROPHETIC VOICE DARES TO  
 SAY DIFFERENT!

THE SHATTERED, FRAGMENTED,  
 LIFELESS, DEAD THING THAT WAS  
 ISRAEL... *WOULD* BE GIVEN NEW LIFE...  
 AND GOD WOULD DO THAT FOR  
 THEM...

FOR DRY BONES ...GIVE MUSCLE AND  
 SINEW  
 FOR LIFELESS CORPSE...

A LIVING BREATHING POSSIBILITY....

YOU SEE, THEY HAD FORGOTTEN,  
 IN THEIR DISTRESS - THEY WERE  
 MISSING A CRUCIAL ELEMENT,  
 IN THEIR DESPAIR AND ANGST...  
 THEY WERE FORGETTING... GOD -  
 AND WHAT HIS POWER COULD  
 ACHIEVE...  
 THE DIFFERENCE HE COULD MAKE.

THEY KNEW THEY COULD HUFF AND  
 PUFF ALL THEY WANTED:  
 SING ALL THE SENTIMENTAL SONGS  
 ABOUT  
 THE LAND ACROSS THE WATER,

THE KING WHO WOULD COME  
 SOMEDAY, ONE DAY...  
 BUT,  
 IT WOULD DO NO GOOD.  
 THEY COULD DREAM AND STRUGGLE  
 AND SCRATCH AWAY AT THE  
 FUTURE...TO NO AVAIL...

THEY NEEDED GOD.  
 THEY NEEDED TO *BELIEVE IN GOD* -  
 AND EZEKIEL DARED THEM TO DO  
 THAT.

TO ALLOW THAT NEW,  
 TRANSFORMING, DIMENSION  
 INTO THE CRISIS...

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HOW WOULD IT CHANGE?  
 GOD WOULD MAKE THE IMPOSSIBLE...  
 NOT JUST POSSIBLE -BUT A REALITY...

AYE RIGHT!!

YOU SEE,  
 YOU COULD DISMISS THIS AS SIMPLY  
 WISHFUL THINKING...

THE STUFF OF FAIRY STORIES...  
 FABLES FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT  
 OF THE WEAK-MINDED...  
 WELL-INTENTIONED PLACEBOS FOR  
 AN ACHING PEOPLE...  
 "SOME WHERE OVER THE RAINBOW"  
 ..."ONE FINE DAY..."

IT WILL ALL BE ALRIGHT....  
 LIKE THE SLAVES OF THE DEEP SOUTH  
 COMFORTING THEMSELVES  
 WITH SOME MYTHICAL BRIGHT NEW  
 DAY

WAY BEYOND THE BLUE HORIZON....

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BUT PEOPLE AREN'T DAFT...PEOPLE  
 LIKE US SAY...

*WE HAVE NO TIME FOR ELASTOPLAST  
 ON A SEVERED LIMB...WE NEED  
 SOMETHING NEW AND DYNAMIC  
 THAT MAKES A REAL AND CALCULABLE  
 DIFFERENCE.*

IS EZEKIEL THE PURVEYOR OF  
 RELIGIOUS PLATITUDES...

OR DOES HE SEE SOMETHING WE  
HAVE FORGOTTEN TO SEE...?  
ARE THE EXILED JEWS BEING OFFERED  
COMFORTING UNTRUTHS TO EASE  
THE PAIN...

OR IS IT *REALLY POSSIBLE* THAT  
FROM THIS IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION OF  
DISPERSION, EXILE AND EXTINCTION...

THEY MIGHT GET HOME...?

REBUILD THE TEMPLE...START

AFRESH...?

CAN THE DRY BONES DANCE?

THESE THINGS DON'T HAPPEN.

ONCE YOU'RE GONE, YOU'RE GONE.

WHAT A CRAZY ILLUSION TO

PROMOTE.

How cruel to lead people to hope in  
such nonsense.

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Well,

Here are the facts – this is the

RECORD OF HISTORY...

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL ENJOYED NOT  
ONE BUT TWO REMARKABLE  
RETURNS...

FROM CRUSHING EXILE IN BABYLON  
FROM THE HORROR OF THE  
HOLOCAUST IN EUROPE...

FACT!

WHATEVER WE MAY FEEL ABOUT THE  
RIGHTS AND WRONGS...

WHATEVER WORRYING OUTCOMES...

THOSE IMPOSSIBLE RETURNS HAVE

SPAWNED

THE FACTS ARE INCONTROVERTIBLE...

THE IMPOSSIBLE BECAME REALITY.

*THEY SAW THE UNEXPECTED*

HAND OF GOD IN THIS...

THEY CAME TO SEE THAT

PURPOSE OF GOD WILL BE

FULFILLED...

THE PROMISES OF GOD WILL BE

KEPT...

THAT VALLEY OF DRY BONES

REINVIGORATED –

OFFERED A POWERFUL SIGN OF  
 GOD'S ABILITY TO SURPRISE US...  
 SURPRISE US WITH JOY!

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THE STORY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL – OF  
 THE RAISING OF LAZARUS...*THAT*  
 SHOULD SURPRISE US!

The fact that Lazarus has been dead  
 for four days, puts *this* event on a  
 whole new level.

The two previously recorded miracles  
 of Jesus  
 “bringing dead people back to life,”  
 as described in the other gospels,  
 happened really only moments after  
 they have been confirmed dead...so  
 there might just have been some  
*lingering questions* over the reality of  
 the miracle...

Maybe they hadn't been dead at  
 all...maybe he just *revived* them as

they awoke from a deep comatose  
 state?

Maybe he couldn't really raise people  
 from death...at all!

But Lazarus was very dead.

As we say in Glasgow...Stone ginger  
 dead.

Four days in the tomb...  
 way beyond the magical time where  
 superstition allowed that the soul  
 hovered over the corpse for three  
 days - just in case.

There was no “just in case” or  
 “maybe's” about this one –  
 Lazarus was as dead as dead could be.  
 Without going into details, Palestine  
 was not a place to leave your dead  
 lying about for very long...  
 No, you don't get any deader than  
 Lazarus was.

So, this was big stuff.

This was a huge miracle – a *mega* sign and statement.

If, in the power of God, Jesus can do this...

there is nothing he *can't* do!!

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But it's the very fact that it was such a quantum leap in the miraculous that

raises more questions than it answers.

We are right to be puzzled as to why

there is *no mention* of this mega –

miracle in any of the other gospels...or

anywhere else in the Christian library.

Only *John* tells this story – surely one

of the most remarkable healings,

events, signs and wonders of the

entire ministry of Jesus.

You would imagine it would be the

talk of the street,

*the hot story* within the Christian

community and beyond.

So hot, it seems from John's account,

that the authorities felt the need to

find a way to get rid of Lazarus

himself...so that the story would

spread no further.

Yet, of this pivotal moment in the

ministry of Jesus –

no mention anywhere else... than in

John's gospel.

Strange but true!!

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But, we have to wonder - where does

the miracle start?

*"Take the stone away!"* says Jesus.

*THIS IS WHERE IT STARTS...*

*THIS IS WHERE FAITH IS PUT ON THE*

*LINE...*

*"DO YOU BELIEVE OR NOT BELIEVE...*

*DO YOU BELIEVE ENOUGH TO TAKE*

*THE STONE AWAY?"*

Now, wait a minute!

*Take the stone away?*

You cannot be serious...Do you realise

what you are asking...

what an *intrusion* this will be - what an interruption of all that is normal and expected and decent?

We don't do that. That is not done.

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*Take the stone away* – is the moment of choice and decision.

Do they believe in him – do they trust him...

He could hardly have said anything more shocking or offensive.

In the midst of their grief, they are being asked to do something unthinkable...unspeakable.

It's a huge ask!

A huge act of faith.

*Do you believe that the reach of God's power is beyond the impossible?*

If they *refuse* to take the stone away – if they insist that there is no way they are going to participate in this high-wire walk – then nothing will happen.

There will be no sign given...no miracle will occur.

It will be business as usual.

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Nothing may actually happen even if they do take the stone away...but – definitely- nothing will happen if they leave it untouched...

In this event here - is the first act of faith.

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Like, if we don't ask we surely won't receive.

The Basic RHYTHM AND Reality of the life of faith.

Receiving has something to do with asking.

If we don't take the first step of faith...however trembling that step may be...we certainly won't get there.

If God wants it to be done, wants to demonstrate his power to make things happen in our world, in our lives...

and we don't give him the chance



because of our hesitancy – our  
 unbelief – our lack of faith...  
 then the logic is that we stymie that  
 movement of God,  
 we block it.

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Faith takes the first steps.

God enables the rest.

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It's remarkable the unremarkable way  
 in which the story is told...this amazing  
 shocking story is told in such a matter  
 of fact way...as if people emerged  
 from tombs every Tuesday!!

There is nothing very melodramatic  
 about it...no celestial fireworks...just a  
 summons and a response....no  
 heightened sense of the supernatural  
 – just the bald realism of the raw  
 emotions – the uncertainties and the  
 reservations – and loud command – an  
 authoritative summons...from the one  
 who can.

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But “John” is not interested in the  
 “how is it done!” question, the  
*mechanics* of bringing the dead to  
 life...he wants us to see  
 what it means.

Who it is this event reveals - in all his  
 power and command.

It's the easiest thing in the world to  
 say the words...

”I am the resurrection and the life...”

a wholly different thing to  
*demonstrate* the truth of that  
 affirmation.

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We might want to know which came  
 first for John,  
 his faith in the risen Christ as the one  
 who is truly the Resurrection and the  
 Life?

Or the story that shows this is who  
 Jesus is...the one who has power over  
 death.

Are we required to have faith in the story – or to find the truth that is *embedded in the meaning of the story?* -

this backward glance from Easter morning,

in the light of which...

all experience is to be interpreted and understood.

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The truth is...

We all need resurrections along the way...

someone to breathe life and hope into darkness of our failure, need or loss.

Stuttering careers become stale and without purpose

Sterile and failing relationships a shadow of what they were..

Faith that has somehow been mislaid

Churches that have lost their passion for God and for the Gospel...

It's about what God might do now - as well as what he did back then!

And it's all about the Spirit of Christ making the difference...

Injecting life

Inspiring life

Infusing life...

making dead experiences alive again...

dead churches alive again....

Making the dry bones dance...

when we believe in him enough to ask him to...

and when he asks us to

show faith in him

and

take away the stone...

believing in him enough

to let him bring new life...

AMEN.