

Can these bones live?

Can these bones live? That story from the prophecy of Ezekiel has always been a favourite of mine. A bit of background: the prophet, from a priestly family, was among the first batch of exiles deported to Babylon. At that time, Jerusalem and Judah were allowed to persist under the Babylonian-appointed king Zedekiah; but there was no hope for them in the words of judgement Ezekiel were given to proclaim. These were fulfilled when Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, provoking him to besiege Jerusalem: its deserved end was in sight. But when news of the city's final capitulation reached Ezekiel, his message shifted to one of God's plan for the exiles' restoration: one I imagine they, in their bereavement, weren't in a good place to hear; a prophet's charge is rarely an easy one. The valley of dry bones is part of that prophecy to the house of Israel, as they were saying, *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.*

Can these bones live? I know the Lord's rhetorical question to the prophet is going to keep coming back to me, as our Diocesan Strategy continues its development and then moves into implementation. As part of that Strategy (which you can read more about on the diocesan website) benefices, or parishes, will be invited to join one of four *Streams*, appropriate to where they see themselves in relation to mission: what they are doing or aspire to do to grow in discipleship and share the good news of Jesus Christ. These groupings of benefices or parishes with similar profiles will then be encouraged to share experiences, explore appropriate resources and be inspired by what is shown to be possible, given the right attitudes and inputs, in particular chosen locations.

Inevitably, I wonder what that will be like for us? Will we engage with it as a benefice? Have we got the motivation and capacity to commit to mission-focussed activity? Or will our Church outlook continue to be dominated by the demands of just *keeping the show on the road*: demands which, as we know, increasingly fall on fewer, aging shoulders? And if we do engage, will it have something to offer us, which we can go with? *Can these particular bones live?*

Sharing stories from around the diocese will be an important element of each Stream. What's worked in one place may be an encouragement to those in a similar place. What's been tried and found unfruitful may provide a learning point for others. One story we have to tell is that of our *Open the Book Team*: continuing in its sharing of Bible stories with successive generations of children at Reedham School. Even the disappointment felt when Freethorpe no longer wanted our services was a kind of encouragement, because it showed that the appetite to do it is still there.

But in yesterday's presentation to Diocesan Synod, the Revd David Lloyd, who works in Mission in our diocese, said something else about stories: *The stories you live in are the stories you live out.* If the main story we tell ourselves in the Diocese of Norwich, or in our benefice, is of inexorable decline, that will be what we radiate to others and may well be what we continue to experience. That isn't an invitation to delude ourselves, to tell stories pretending that everything in the garden is rosy. But it does ask us to consider what other stories we might, even ought to inhabit?

The Israelites in exile told themselves, *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost*; they weren't in any kind of position to grasp that hope if the opportunity arose – as it would when the Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus. And so God gave Ezekiel a different story to tell: a valley of bones so dry that even the prophet wasn't convinced that there was any possibility of them coming to life: *Can these bones live? O Lord God, only you know that!* And yet Ezekiel was faithful: he accepted the Lord's invitation and prophesied – maybe just to see what would happen. And the bones came together and sinews, flesh and skin grew over them; but there was no sign of life. It was good while it lasted, but it was a failure. So Ezekiel gave up... didn't he? No, he didn't: he listened to God again, adjusted his strategy and prophesied to the breath (or spirit) – *and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

As Christians, the main story that we live in is not the story of the institutional decline of the Church of England or the parish church – let's leave it to others to tell those stories, as some will. The main story we live in is the story of God's life-giving relationship with his people, particularly as experienced in Jesus Christ – who is *the resurrection and the life*. It is a story within which the breath of the Spirit has the power to breathe life into the driest of bones.

In the end that is what gives me hope – and urges me to engage with the Streams and whatever else is coming – alongside others in the diocese in similar circumstances.

But we will need to engage. In his vision, Ezekiel had to prophesy: the miracle wasn't going to happen of its own accord. Despite his initial scepticism; despite his stage one failure, Ezekiel prophesied as God commanded him – and the bones did indeed live.