**The Seventh Sunday of Easter**

Our reading is Ezekiel 26: 24-28

I spoke last week about a new covenant, which is about healthy relationship. The rainbow is a sign of covenant, the whole of the Bible might be summarised as about relationship, between God and his people, God and us. That of course has implications for the relationships we have with others. It is really a very simple story. It is about a relationship that begins wonderfully, goes wrong, and is made new.

And that doesn’t just happen once. It happens time and time again. God never gives up on us.

Ezekiel writes, “you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” This is about mending relationship. Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Jesus at a time when Israel had been invaded, the temple destroyed, and many of the people taken into captivity in Babylon. People saw that as a sign of being abandoned by God. They felt bereft.

Ezekiel is an interesting character, he sometimes acted out the message he heard. In chapter 5 we read that he takes a sword and uses it to cut his own hair, he invented the lockdown haircut, and anyone who has tried to cut their own hair needs to read what happens next.

Sometimes, indeed often, Ezekiel’s words are uncomfortable and we might be tempted to shy away from him. But Ezekiel is a prophet in the truest sense. He says hard things because sometimes nettles need to be grasped, and it is only when we grasp difficult truths that healing and restoration are possible. Ultimately everything Ezekiel says is said in hope and love. God will never give up on his people.

One of the best known of Ezekiel’s visions comes in chapter 37 when the Spirit of God takes him to a valley full of bones, very dry bones, life was totally annihilated. God asks if these bones can live. It helps us to remember that in those times people believed that once you were dead your existence was over. God could do nothing for the dead. The dead were beyond his reach. The relationship was broken, permanently.

So what happens next is beyond human imagination or comprehension. Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of bones is something completely new. If you know the song, Dem Bones first recorded by the Jubilee singers in 1928, then you know what happened next. As the second chorus says;

“Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.

Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.

Now hear the word of the Lord.”

Where life was destroyed, where people felt utterly cut off from God, where all hope was lost, God chooses to act. That is something new.

These are difficult times. This Sunday we find ourselves between Jesus’ Ascension and Pentecost. There is a sense of a gap, perhaps a feeling of being bereft. It is in that strange in-between time where we find ourselves. Several times this week people have told me that they are feeling bereft. That’s not a word we often use, yet I have heard it spoken many times over the past few days.

A friend said to me, “These are strange times, all the landmarks have gone.” That captures the sense of feeling bereft. Much has been taken from us, and there is nothing that can take its place. Central to this is the sense that we are out of relationship. We cannot visit friends. Grandparents cannot hug grandchildren. Our churches remain closed. We are forced to keep others at a distance.

I think we need to be reminded that when Jesus’ friends met him his Easter body still bore the scars of crucifixion. Jesus told Thomas to see his hands and his feet, to put his hand into the wound of the spear. Resurrection, new life, new relationship doesn’t pretend the bad things didn’t happen. The body Jesus takes to his Father’s side is not perfect. The humanity that Ascends is pierced and stabbed and beaten. God’s relationship with us takes us as we are, and that includes this sense of being bereft.

Ezekiel reminds us that God does not act by waving a magic wand. He acts through mending relationships. If we sense ourselves in a place without landmarks, if we are feeling bereft, then maybe it is in how we make and renew relationship that can be our guide. That might be our relationship with others, perhaps someone we haven’t recently made contact with, perhaps someone we are spending more time with than usual – which isn’t always easy, most certainly it includes our relationship with God.

In this relationship we have to do very little, only be willing and listen.

In the depth of silence no words are needed,

no language required.

In the depth of silence we are called to listen.

Listen to the beating of your heart.

Listen to the blowing of the wind,

listen for the movement of the Spirit.

Be silent says the Lord, and know that I am God.

And listen, to the cry of those whose voices are not heard.

Listen to those whose suffering is overlooked.

Listen to those who are anxious and fearful.

Listen to weeping of those who mourn,

and do not forget to listen also for the laughter of children.

For that is authentic relationship, listen to people, living with people, living for God.