

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – Resurrection

The Rev'd Canon Dr Matthew Anstey – Synod 2017

Principal, St Barnabas College & Canon Theologian, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide

Senior Lecturer, CSU School of Theology

Honorary Visiting Fellow, University of Adelaide (Linguistics)

Ezekiel's Vision

¹ The hand of Yahweh came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.¹

A valley full of bones. Dry bones.

Parched bones, bones picked clean by vultures and hyenas, bleached and barren. Cursed bones.²

Not corpses, not skeletons, only bones, flung around helter-skelter.

Bones mean *death*. A valley teeming with death.

A jagged white blanket of death, thrown over a silent landscape.

Hardly an inspiring vision.

³ Yahweh said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Can anything overcome death? Can life come from death? Is there any hope for these bones?

I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Ezekiel has no answer. He doesn't know. Only Yahweh knows. In the face of death, our knowledge comes up short.

⁴ Yahweh said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, ... I will bring spirit³ into you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, ... and you shall know that I am Yahweh."

Ezekiel is directed to prophesy *to the bones*. God's word is addressed to our place of death.

So Ezekiel prophesied as he had been commanded.⁴

It began with a whimper.

Just a rattle, a tiny tinkling, a clatter here, a clunk there, and then *whooshka*, bones going crazy, every direction imaginable:

feet to shins to knees to hips to spines to skulls

And then ligaments and cartilage and muscles and skin and hair – complete humans ... *almost*.

Ezekiel is then directed to prophesy *to the Spirit*, the very Spirit of God,⁵ to command it to come from the four corners of the earth to breathe upon these bones.

The Spirit rushes into them; they stand proud, alive and kicking, a vast crowd.⁶

What a vision! But what does it mean?

Yahweh spells it out in verses 11-14. It is carefully structured in three parallel sets of three.

○ ¹¹ *“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say,*

1. *‘Our bones are dried up,*
2. *our hope is lost;*
3. *we are cut off completely.’*

○ ¹² *Therefore prophesy, and say to them,*

1. *I am going to open your graves, and*
2. *bring you up from your graves, O my people; and*
3. *I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ And*

○ *you shall know that I am Yahweh* ¹⁴

1. *I will put my spirit within you, and*
2. *you shall live, and*
3. *I will place you on your own land; and*

○ *you shall know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and I have acted.”*

Notice the threefold pattern.

1. Our bones are dried up > I am going to open your graves > and put my spirit in you
2. Our hope is lost > I will resurrect you > and you shall live
3. We are cut off completely > I will bring you back to Israel > and place you in your own land.

And interweaved with this braided tapestry is the *telos* of this resurrection: “You shall know that I am Yahweh..., you shall know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and have acted”.

In their return from exile and restoration to life, Israel shall know who Yahweh truly is. Israel shall become once again Yahweh’s friend.

Resurrection

What an astounding vision⁷ of resurrection!

Four reflections.

1. Resurrection overcomes death

For Israel, death and life are not simply biological realities, but social realities. As Levenson says, to be alive is “[to live] within a flourishing and continuing [household]⁸ that dwelt in a productive and secure association with its land.”⁹

To die, therefore, was to fail to flourish, to be cut off from family and friends and land.¹⁰

Exile was a form of death.

Resurrection for Ezekiel is so much more than life after death.¹¹ It is as about life *before* death: spiritual, social, economic life overcoming spiritual, social, economic death.

2. Resurrection recreates the world

In the vision, Israel is created not out of thin air, but out of *their own dead bones*. Ezekiel adapts the creation language of Genesis: “Yahweh God formed the man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”¹²

*This world, no matter how dead and lifeless and futile, contains everything God needs to re-create new life.*¹³

Resurrection re-creates the world, “grown weary with the burden of itself”¹⁴ from its very own carnage.

3. Resurrection is the free gift of the Spirit

The words “spirit” and “bones” dominate. God takes the bones, the dust of the earth, but the Spirit gives life.

The contrast between Spirit and bones signifies Israel’s *inability* to save itself from death and God’s *free gift* of life, given without reserve.

If all we have is bones, what can bring life? Not repentance, not hard work, not prayer. No, only the Spirit of God.¹⁵

Resurrection is the exorbitant, lavish, spectacular gift of God.

4. Resurrection creates a community who are God’s friends

Verse 11 reads, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.”

The work of the Spirit is to create a whole people, not a collection of unrelated individuals.

The Israelites had no conception of the self constituted by the inner depths of one's soul. Instead, the self is authentic precisely in its interdependence upon other people, and not, as we (in the West) would say, in being true to itself.¹⁶

So resurrection is not about *you* as *you*, but about you as incorporated into a community much bigger and more significant than you.

It is God's people, as friends restored from exile, who are the light to the world.

So, what does resurrection mean? Here is Ezekiel's answer, refracted through a New Testament lens¹⁷:

Resurrection is the re-creation of God's people on earth, by the Spirit, out of the carnage of this world, so that through faith in Christ we may be freed from death in all its forms and restored to the life promised in creation, participating without reserve in the mission of God.

The New Testament Vision of Resurrection

Is this vision in accord with the New Testament vision? I would suggest a resounding Yes!¹⁸

Think about each dimension.

1. The resurrection of Jesus **overcomes death** in all its forms: biological, but also the death of homelessness, corruption, drug addiction, social dislocation, family violence – these are all forms of death.
2. The resurrection of Jesus **re-creates Jesus** from his very own dead bones, retaining even the wounds in Jesus' hands. God doesn't create Jesus Version II, from scratch. God does not need to destroy this world to re-create new life.
3. The resurrection of Jesus is **the free gift of the Spirit**. Romans 1:3-4 says that Jesus is declared to be the Son of God through the Spirit by his resurrection.
4. The resurrection of Jesus **creates a community of God's friends**, namely, the church. Through baptism, we die in Christ so that together as Christ's body we implement God's resurrection agenda.

The Gospel therefore entails that God is committed without reserve to the fulfilment of creation's promise, the promise of wholeness and *shalom*.¹⁹

Hence, when God *saves* us, it enables us to be fully responsible, fully authentic, full participating in the mission of God, the project of creation.²⁰

Salvation is not about our removal from history and physicality but our plunging into contingency and embodiedness, into the specific context where God's Spirit places us.

Hence the resurrection entails that ethics and aesthetics – justice and jazz – are *intrinsic* to the Christian life, and not something we do begrudgingly on the way to heaven.

Concluding Reflections

Yet... how can we talk about justice and jazz, wholeness and *shalom*, in light of all we've heard from the Royal Commission?²¹

What does it mean to say God brings new life, when in the eyes of so many the very plausibility and coherence of our story is ethically compromised and spiritually incoherent?

How can we find a language and grammar capable of proclaiming the good news of Jesus, in 2017 and beyond, given this unfolding catastrophe?

Ezekiel 37 offers some guidance.

First, there needs to be sustained attention given to naming the forms our darkness has taken, no matter how painful. We must be honest about our dry and desiccated bones. Central to this is hearing the stories of survivors, from their perspective, to hear what it is like to live on the inside of their lives, looking out, looking out at the church, looking out towards God. Lament is primary here.

Commissioner Fitzgerald spoke of the erosion of trust so many survivors experience.

We must wrestle, like Israel did, over and over, to find the words to enable truth-telling, the poems and liturgies and sermons appropriate for this journey. We must all undertake such wrestling, even those of us for whom this is not a lived experience.

In that light, here is a poem I wrote yesterday in response to Commissioner Fitzgerald's challenging talk. It is called 'erosion'.

'erosion'

Matthew Anstey - September 2017

gnarled and knotted and thwarted words
a brutal waterfall of promises broken, eroding
escarpments of trust, a dys-baptismal rinsing
of life's loves, so lured into
a tomb thick with things unsaid

Secondly, the single question in this passage, and its answer, is fundamental: "Mortal, can these bones live?" - Ezekiel had no answer, and had the courage and humility to acknowledge this. He said simply, "O Lord God, you know."

The pastoral wisdom of 'not knowing' is a well from which we can never draw too deeply.

Finally, as we stand like Ezekiel in the midst of death, we must hold tenaciously to the good news of God's gift of life through faith in Christ, trusting that God alone can bring resurrection and new life into situations of human impossibility.

Rivers will flow in deserts, the blind will see, captives will be set free. Death will be conquered. Death *has been* overcome.

Death, in all its invidious and soul-destroying ways, "has lost its sting".²²

For God has breathed resurrection life into our hearts -- into our churches, into our lives, into even our dead bones.

God alone can bring resurrection, because God has spoken that word which we are unable to say ourselves: "You are free!"²³

Amen.

Notes

¹ This is my own translation. I translate *ruach* throughout as 'spirit'.

² Compare *Ezekiel*, Hermeneia p. 259 Wolff. For Israel, corpses left in the open are cursed, so these are cursed bones.

³ The NRSV uses "breath" in many places, whereas the Hebrew uses *spirit* (*ruach*) throughout. This is important to retain.

⁴ ⁷ *So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.* ⁸ *I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.*

⁵ ⁹ *Then Yahweh said to me, "Prophesy to the spirit [breath], prophesy, mortal, and say to the spirit [breath]: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O spirit [breath], and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."*

⁶ ¹⁰ *I prophesied as he commanded me, and the spirit [breath] came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

⁷ The Talmud calls it a *mashal*, a parable.

⁸ "kin group" in Levenson.

⁹ P. 155 *ibid*, Levenson.

¹⁰ The death of an individual person is not a problem so long as the family name lives on. This is why childlessness and barrenness are so dreaded, because the family name will die out.

¹¹ I don't address the question of whether the Israelites believed in life after death and/or bodily resurrection.

¹² Genesis 2:7. I take *ha'adam* as referring to a male (contra those who read it as an androgynous being).

¹³ Creation can be renewed without destroying this world.

¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The beauty of the infinite: The aesthetics of Christian truth*, 2003, Eerdmans, p. 107.

¹⁵ Levenson summarises, "[Israel's history] is a long unrelenting history of rebellion against their God and immoral behaviour and perversion of the lowest order. They have been the rankest of idolaters from early on ... yet their God's commitment to restore and repatriate them remains steadfast." P. 164 *ibid*.

¹⁶ Summary of De Vito, *OT Anthropology*, CBQ, 1999, as cited in Levenson, *ibid* p. 112.

¹⁷ Given the reference to "faith in Christ".

¹⁸ See Thorwald Lorenzon, *Resurrection and Discipleship*.

¹⁹ Douglas John Hall, "the cross of Christ marks, in a decisive and irrevocable way, the unconditional participation of God in the life of the world, ... the commitment of God to the fulfilment of creation's promise." *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 35.

²⁰ John Douglas Hall writes, "God calls us as creatures to a life of extraordinary responsibility, and 'salvation' implies reclaiming that responsibility." p. 247 *ibid*. Also p. 108 "Justification is the righting of the human person so that he or she will behave humanly – will become, so to speak, himself or herself."

²¹ I rewrote the conclusion of my Bible study (prepared beforehand) in light of the first two days of the General Synod.

²² Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8).

²³ Resurrection matters because, in the words of Douglas John Hall, "this world is beloved of God and must not be abandoned.", p. 220. *Ibid*, said there though in relation to the message of the cross.