

Christ In My Culture

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sunday 20th May – Pentecost Sunday

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Readings: Psalm 104:1-15, Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 16:4-15, Acts 2:1-21

This morning we have enjoyed some contributions from different cultural perspectives. One of the things that stops life from becoming drab and boring is difference. When a person says they are bored what they lack is not interest but imagination. God has created the most incredible, wonderful, fascinating world and populated it with no less interesting people. As we engage beyond ourselves life becomes more and more interesting. Living in a cocoon may seem safe but it's incredibly boring! God neither wanted us to have boring nor lives lacking in purpose. When we celebrate our cultures we celebrate the creativity of God and His wonderful plan of creating peoples so that we could widen and strengthen all of our creative possibilities.

The text of Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is a vivid and well-known image and a powerful metaphor at many levels. The valley into which the prophet Ezekiel was placed was strewn with the bright white bones of many slain soldiers and military camp personnel. That the bones were bleached and bare of any flesh indicates that they had been lying there for a considerable period of time. No one had cared. No one had come to help or even to bury the dead. This is a stark, brutal of complete desolation, hopelessness and abandonment. It is past hope. All too easily situations in life can seem that way. The death of a loved one, the illness of a parent, or child or friend. The loss of health and the increasing ravages of age. The collapse of financial security and employment. The lack of housing or food or opportunity. The collapse of our beloved cultures and values. There are situations in life that can make us feel abandoned, forgotten, even by God and that there is no hope. Sadly, our continual setting of suicide records in New Zealand speaks to this all too clearly.

It is into such anguish that God speaks to Ezekiel. "Son of man, can these bones live?" Now Ezekiel's answer reveals that he was no idiot. Ezekiel had already been assured by God that Israel would one day be restored but now before his eyes was evidence of Israel's complete and total failure. Can these bones live? Ezekiel knows that there is no way in normal human terms that the bones could live – they were the physical embodiment of death. But Ezekiel also knew that the power of the Living God is such that anything He chooses to do is possible, even if unlikely or improbable in human eyes. His response then, "Lord, You alone know." Shows real wisdom. What is impossible in human eyes is not impossible for God.

God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy. To speak God's truth into the situation. To bring life. To bring about a new state of affairs. And not just once but multiple times until the goal is achieved. The bones that have been stripped bare are now pulled together, dressed with tendons and skin and flesh and the breath of God is breathed into them again. Life is restored. Health is restored. Community is restored. And furthermore, Ezekiel is promised that the very dead themselves of Israel will one day be restored. God will place His Spirit in them and they will live as and where God intended. Desolation has given way to incredible life, purpose and provision.

In John 16 we move forward in time to Jesus. Hundreds of years have passed and the situation from Ezekiel's time has gone from bad to worse. What had seemed to be the fulfilment of Ezekiel's message had begun with the return to Jerusalem and the re-establishment of the nation. But successively being over-run by the Assyrians, Greeks and Romans left the Jewish nation a slave in their own land to larger powers and forces beyond their control. Even the Temple, run by the Sadducees was no longer a true house of worship but rather was infested with political intrigue, manipulations and skulduggery. How then was God going to bring about life? The dry bones had flesh but only the appearance of life and corrupt life at best. This could not have been what God intended? Surely? When Jesus arrived on the scene, politically He erupted. He challenged the religious leadership of Israel to its very core. He upturned things in the Temple, physically and metaphorically. Was the Temple they had created a place of worship or something else? Why was love for one's neighbour limited to only one's own race and even then poorly administered? Where was justice? Where was integrity? Where was love? And most of all – where was the true worship of God? As Jesus points out to the disciples it had got so bad that those who truly want to love and serve God had become the enemies of the religious state. Put out of the synagogues and maligned by all and sundry, true worshippers of God were no longer wanted and were seen as opponents and a threat to the religious leaders. These leaders do not know God or the true power of God.

But all is not lost. All is within God's plan so that true faith, true motive, will be revealed. The pinnacle of the debauchery will see the Messiah Himself executed. God amongst us put to death by those who should have been watching for His coming and rejoicing at His arrival. A time would come when the beginning of the end would occur. And it did. Jesus' death was the turning point of history. In Jesus' death and resurrection, the devil and death were defeated. The penalty of sin was paid and the burden of the Law lifted for those on whom Jesus' favour rests. As Jesus warned the disciples what would happen, they would also remember what He promised would come next. Jesus would send to them the Holy Spirit. Almost without exception, until this time the Holy Spirit had come exclusively upon prophets, priests and kings. Now the Holy Spirit would be given to ordinary believers. What this would mean the disciples could not really have had any idea. In the pain and despair at Jesus' death His words and promises of what was to come were all but lost in the pain and harsh reality of Roman crucifixion. But resurrection brought a new hope, knowledge and sense of expectation. God was bringing life beyond what they could imagine. And death was no longer a barrier. Jesus was beyond the grave and beyond death. As Jesus left, as He ascended, they were told to wait.

And wait they did, until the Day of Pentecost. How we hate to wait for things. How long it is until something happens ... especially when we are not sure what is going to happen. The disciples now knew that Jesus was alive and that He had returned to the Father. But what was to come was an unknown. Prayer and a bit more patience were required.

What was God up to? Israel as a nation had failed repeatedly in its role as a light to the nations. They had even rejected the sent Messiah. But God's plan was far greater than any had imagined. At the tower of Babel, we remember that story in Genesis 11, God had confused the language of the people as they had, in their arrogance, tried to build a tower to reach God in the heavens. Language defines a culture, it's as the very heart of the shared expression, hopes and dreams of a people. Without a language a culture, to a large extent, dies. God created a division of peoples, not just to stop a building project, but in order that a wider expression of humanity might be discovered. One of the failures of Israel that had led to the metaphorical and all but literal dry bones, was the continual inward looking, self-serving, mentality. I liken it to food in New Zealand when I was growing up. It was basically meat and three veg every day. That was it. Friday nights were a treat because that was pay day and dad brought home fish and chips. For the bulk of the country there was no variety, always pretty much the same thing. It was boring. Israel had become boring: focussed in on itself, it had failed to become what God intended. But God could foresee what would happen. In creating multiple cultures, different peoples and languages, by spreading peoples across the face of the earth, God ensured that the fullest expressions of humanity would develop. God created us to be inventive, creative, varied, intelligent, loving and nurturing beings. But in a box of self-interest and introspection these things are crushed and a more base nature takes over. This is what had happened and Israel had effectively died. However, at the same time, all over the world, people groups were developing and seeking after God in their own way. Often uninformed, sometimes catastrophically badly, and sometimes wonderfully, all people are built with that inner desire to seek after God. Only an ongoing and deliberate action of will and a corruption of human nature can suppress this desire. All of the cultures of the world have developed some good and wonderful aspects and some less worthy. How was God going to bring all people back together? The answer was Pentecost.

As we read in Acts the disciples were gathered together in prayer in the Upper Room. This was a small cross-section of the faithful remnant of Israel, all Jews. A group that had known and loved Jesus and had rejoiced at the return of the Messiah from death. Life was now very different for them but it would become even more different and challenging. On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples. The gospel message, the Good News about Jesus Christ and God's plan for the redemption of humanity was spoken out. People from all around came and heard the message in their own language. Tongues of fire rested on the disciples heads and the sound of an amazing wind was heard. God was demonstrating His power was being released in a new way. From now on all the world would hear the gospel, would hear of God's plan and God's challenge to bring all that had been discovered together into His Body the church where Christ is the head.

That provided and continues to provide an interesting challenge. Every culture has things that are to be measured against God's standard. That which is unworthy is to be rejected and that which is worthy is to be embraced and celebrated. How badly wrong did the early missionaries of the Pacific get it when they excluded Polynesian

dance from worship? How wrong was it in New Zealand when the speaking of Maori language was banned? How wrong have cultures got it when they have followed man-made gods and idols? Or the so-called “modern” world with its socialism, capitalism and materialism that denies God and places everything within the abilities of man? On the other hand how many wonderfully creative, loving, artistic and technological advances have been made that enhance all of life? All of these are to be brought before God to test their worthiness. Christianity is not about conforming the world to a particular form of worship or life that reflects a given culture, particularly the Western one that many well-intentioned but mis-informed missionaries tried to impose for so long. Rather God is calling all of His people from all over the world to come to Jesus. To listen to His words and live according to them. In doing so each and every culture brings all of its difference as gift. All is tested against what Jesus wants of us and together we can truly celebrate what God is doing ... resurrecting dry bones, not just those of Israel, but those of faith all over the world, and fleshing them out with endless life and creativity. The new breath, the new life, the new language is a common one – that of the Spirit. This is the true new life that God is bringing together. Christ in our cultures, transforming, challenging and rejoicing in the creativity that God has gifted.

Just in closing, as I watched the royal wedding last night I reflected on how wonderful things can be in the world. How much there is to celebrate when good people get together and do their best, working together, being together, bringing all our difference together for a good purpose. The wedding was a wonderful celebration of love and cultures coming together, of pageantry and tradition, of new and old, of old and young. When people choose to want to work together the world can be a wonderful place. When God’s people look outward and not inward, when the world is seen as our mission field with a lot of good to be discovered, mission is fun and challenging. This is the field, white for harvest, that God has called us to as He brings old bones and new bones to life.

Amen