Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful ones and fill them with the power of your divine love.

July 29th **The Shofar** Ezekiel 37

Our God is a faithful God

It is worth reminding ourselves of the observation made in a study by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson that (in 2007 at least) 3,500 to 4,000 churches close each year. It is a truly astounding number, especially when we think of how rare it is in the West to find new churches being opened to meet growing demands. As I read through the Gospel story of Jesus feeding the crowd of people following him, I could not help but ask myself whether these churches are closing their doors because they have lost their first passion for Christ, have replaced a Christ centred way of living and preaching with one that is more focussed on the self, on what passes today for truth.

What we need to be doing is clear, at least in theory. We need to work at revitalising our faith communities by being more faithful to God's design for our church. Not our preferred design with only the right kinds of people in the community.

Using a biblical model, our churches need to have more passion for scripture, more loving sacrificial fellowship, clear practical application of the gospel, a zeal for the care of souls, intentional evangelism and an authentic Christ-likeness.

As men and women of faith, we have an inbred certainty that new life can come to our communities of faith but never at the expense of a more faithful pursuit of God's design for the local church. What we need is the kind of health God urges us to pursue, not numbers but faithfulness.

The Ways of God are powerful

We are called to be God's image bearers and as such we can accomplish many great and wonderful things. Science, medicine, technology and more bear witness to this fact. But we do have many limitations to our greatness…we cannot raise a person from death. The same limitations do not constrain God. While many things are impossible for us, nothing is impossible for God. One of my favourite biblical narratives bears witness to this reality: **Ezekiel 37**, the dry bones.

In the chapter before this narrative, God promises his rebellious people – who were at the time suffering in exile in Babylon – that the day was coming when God would make a new covenant with them. This new covenant would transform them from the inside out.

That promise made by God is as real and inviting for us today as it was for Israel in exile. We can ask ourselves just how is God going to revitalise the Church today? A Church is revitalised by the power of God through the Spirit of God at work through the word of God by means of a faithful servants of God. It is all about God!

That is quite a mouthful, but it is a declaration that God is powerful enough to do what a dead and divided church needs: breathe life where there is no life and unite those who cannot be united by any other means.

Son of man, can these bones live?

This was the question God asked the prophet and the question is important. The answer is *God, only you know.* That is a key starting point, for the bones of Israel are long dead, dried out and lying lifeless in the valley. Not even the greatest and holiest of prophets or saints can bring that kind of dead reality back to life again. We could try all kinds of new tricks, programmes, renewals and the like and in the end the bones are still dead.

God is the only one who can breathe life where there is no life. God through His word and sacrament, by his Spirit is the catalyst to bring this kind of revitalisation about. And, as he had done in the beginning, new life came about by the power of his word, his command.

We might not think our Church is as bad as Israel was at that time, reduced to nothing more than a pile of dried out bones. It is up to us to take up God's offer – *Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, O my people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. The you will know that I am the Lord, when I do this…I will put my Spirit within you and you will come to life.* Israel could do this because she had to confront the reality of her life face to face. For many decades she had denied things were not well and it was not until they had been dragged away from the land promised to them by God, and found themselves far away in a pagan land that she could no longer deny what God's prophets had been telling her.

Nothing is impossible for God

Ezekiel reminds us that God is so powerful that he can even raise the dead. He can do what is impossible for humans. He can breathe his life into what was dead and it will live again.

In the next vision Ezekiel takes two sticks, one representing Judah and the other Israel, the two kingdoms that had broken apart after the death of Solomon. He bound these two sticks together and through the power of God, that which was divided and scattered was united once again. One people with the one God. These words of God are as hope filling today as they were back then…*I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land.* Once again, what proved impossible for men and women was achieved though the presence and word of God.

While there are many things that can divide a people, a community, there is only one thing that can unite them – God, and God does this first and foremost through his gift of forgiveness. If they come before him humbly acknowledging their unfaithfulness, God forgives, and then new life can begin once more.

Is this not where are today? Is this not what Paul's prayer in the epistle lays before us? Is this not what John means by retelling the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand?

As it was with Israel, the Church has two major areas of life that need revitalising: our absence of a dynamic and life energising spiritual life ***and*** the presence of hostile divisions among those in the Church. Either one of these is enough to kill off a Church over time but when both work away inside of our church communities, death is imminent.

We need to do what we continue to refuse to accept. We need to forget about making the running and administering of our parishes the primary work of the faith community and instead beginning with tapping into the power of God.

We have ignored the basics

Reviving the parish community is not rocket science. Firstly, we do not ask anywhere near enough of our congregants. You can be a good Anglican today by appearing on just three Sundays in a year! That alone empowers someone to take part in shaping and running the place. Christians in must accep that much, much more is demanded of them than Sundays.

What happened to tithing? What happened to services during the week? Bible studies? Prayer meetings and morning and evening prayer? It is easy to carry the tag "I am a Christian" but it is the "believers" who lack passion, who are not willing to sacrifice everything for the Kingdom that who are taking away the life and soul of the Church.

We should also begin with the great and clear command of Jesus – *Love your neighbour.* How that is compromised, rewritten so we can exclude some, put as a goal towards which we can work but will never achieve. Our failures in loving all others, with no exceptions, is killing us.

Of course, these things are too difficult when we try to address them on our own. It is only God within us; only when God is feeding us in Christ Jesus; only when we are truly Spirit led that bringing life back to the dry bones of the Church that once was is possible.

We know what is required. Why don't we act?