

Second Sunday of Easter: Ezekiel 37:1–14

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On five points this text is instructive for us, just in 1973.

For the first: Say openly that a thing is dead when it is dead — but do not despair!

The prophetic language in the Old Testament is as hard, as straight, and as open as the language in our young people's demonstration marches in the streets. And in both cases there is love underneath. We who are older have taken on a way of speaking about our denominations that is wrapped up, preferably with a little mild and extra sweet ring at the end. That language frees us from collisions — but it does not breathe love. In the high song of love Paul utters an important sentence about love: "It does not rejoice over unrighteousness, but has its joy in the truth." If we as individuals look back on our life, we notice that the periods when we were really renewed were times when all veils were torn away and we saw, saw how it was, saw reality. And the reverse: much drowsiness in our lives has its root in this, that people around us were so lovelessly kind, as Christians often are nowadays: they smoothed things over and they praised without meaning anything.

We should need an analysis, a hard and austere analysis of the Christian denominations' standing in the country, in which one called dead "dead." "Here lie bones over the valley, and they are dried up." Such truths one dares to utter only when there is hope. Before the hopelessly sick the doctor is as a rule silent, but a young man who needs a hard cure in order to be healed can be allowed to hear the truth. And the Christian church, like the Jewish synagogue, is in that sense an eternal youth, in that the two of them have an unlimited future. Whatever the states in the world do, even if new gas chambers are set up, even if churches are forbidden over whole continents, even if the state of Israel falls — of one thing we can be personally certain: in the world's last time there will come to be (whatever else has gone under) a Jewish synagogue that waits for the Messiah and a Christian congregation that believes the Messiah already born and crucified and that now waits for him from the clouds. And the waiting of both shall, in a way now incomprehensible to us, become one and the same

waiting. Even if we are now down in a valley of dead bones, we are a valley that shall seethe with life at the last.

For the second: Be faithful backward — but turn the gaze forward!

Renewal in the Bible is never sheer novelties. Renewal grows out of something old that died. Loved, and much varied, is the picture of the stump, the felled tree, where a shoot springs forth, a root-sprout out of dried-up earth. It is the age-old that is the root on which the new lies. The ground-pattern is the Resurrection on the third day, life's victory in a grave where an executed and dead Christ had been laid: "A rose has sprung from Jesse's root and stem."

After the hard analysis of the denominations' situation in Sweden, an analysis that is useful if it is simply true, true and unadorned, the novelty-makers readily come: "now we shall get life into the old churches! Just listen! Here are all sorts of modern ideologies that we have neglected!" "Do be," says Ezekiel, "a little skeptical of these brisk social educators!" Remember that those who receive life are the dead bones; it is the dead that is renewed; it is there that there comes a rattling and a groaning, so that "the one bone is joined to the other," and sinews and flesh grow on top of it.

Yes, it is the old that receives life — but not when the gaze is turned backward! On the contrary. There is future in the whole of Ezekiel's vision; there is future in the resurrection on the third day; yes, in everything the Bible speaks of. Turn the gaze today toward the world's famine, toward the population explosion, toward the arms race, toward South Africa's quiet stepping-up to a new discharge! "Turn your nose straight into the storm and sing hey and ho!" The church bodies in Sweden belong to the little few that can look the world's problems in the eye without losing heart — it is much worse for the politicians. We in Christ's congregation can go ahead, for the first time in a very long while. And it is fairly certain that thereby we shall also grow together in our divided Swedish Christianity, so that the bones are joined together again and become one body. If we turn the gaze toward one another in Sweden, then we see backward. If we direct the eye toward the global problems of the world, then we see forward, into the 1980s, into the 1990s. Then it is life we see ahead of us, new life, up out of crises.

For the third (now the text begins to be hard to measure): try to get the skeleton in order first — then the Spirit comes! The text here in Ezekiel is a parallel to the creation account. First the human being is created of clay; then God breathes in the spirit of life afterward (Gen. 2:7).

But again it is a matter of something generally biblical. First something utterly outward: deliverance from Egypt, the march through the Red Sea; then, revelation on Sinai. First the appointing of twelve apostles, among them Judas Iscariot (who was to fall away); then the Spirit of Pentecost upon these apostles, among whom none had been particularly viable in the crisis of Good Friday. There are crises in the Bible, but there is no anarchy. This is a point our charismatics and “Jesus people” ought to think about. They readily idealize the absence of outward order, the absence of a skeleton. But bones, even dry bones, are needed for life to fasten on, if the body is not in the long run to become loose and flabby.

One is not to despise administration when one wants to renew the church; that would be an unbiblical ideal! And one must know that dead bones have to be joined together in a new, outward way, if one is to be able to get life into the body. The chance to have the skeleton set in a new order one ought not to turn away, not even if one is offered it by the state. One denomination here in the country, the largest, was just offered twenty years of building, but it preferred to let the dry bones lie as they lie. That is something already regretted on that side, and it is a comfort to know that there is always room for conversion. But when the dry bones come to be joined together in a new way, an outward way, by decision, then it is certain that God’s people in Sweden (as in the old Israel) will get to see the sundered, split pieces of Christ’s body joined together and “covered with skin on top.”

And then! Yes, now we are at last at the center of the text.

For the fourth: The Word, God’s word _____ us, is the _____ that gives life _____ the dead bones.

Israel has a unique trust in the word, this weak thing, this that cannot stand still and that one cannot take hold of — it disappears into the air, it seems. The whole world, according to Israel’s faith, has come to be because God spoke: “Let there be!” When I first came into a synagogue in Amsterdam that was built up anew after the Second World War, “rose up and stood upon its feet,” to speak with Ezekiel, nothing there made such an impression on me as the complete absence of decoration. Not one image, not one ornament. In there, through hard years, a company had gathered that waited for the Word, and for the word alone. They did not wait in vain, though a world war rolled over them. Here we have the difficulty, I think — we in the Christian church, and for that matter in our whole culture, the television culture. Children who cannot read books, but only comic strips; students who cannot hear a dry and orderly lecture without being fed with pictures, on a screen, pictures that make it easier to get

through forty-five minutes of speech but that do not make the auditorium more intelligent; and so we adults at last, sunk down before the television screen, where the world's distress and the world's amusements flicker past, image after image.

Spirit in the Bible, ruach in Hebrew, pneuma in Greek, means "air in motion," wind — "come, you spirit, from the four winds and blow upon these slain," said Ezekiel. Spirit is therefore breath, that is, the blast that comes out of the mouth when one speaks. Therefore there is also exactly the same sense in the two sentences in the Psalter, 33:6: that God creates by the Word, and that he creates by "the breath of his mouth." Therefore the biblical word, this dry word, is the stump out of which the church's renewal comes; the Bible book as the ground of human speech, a book without illustrations, with a demand on us, now, to believe the spoken word. The action we can do together with others — and that we ought to do; we ought to do it far more than hitherto, together with others outside the church. But what is unique for us is our message —

and when the emperor at last became a member of the congregation, yes, then we can explain this development historically from generally known causes, as we explain the Persians' victory over Babylon eight hundred and fifty years earlier.

God never becomes visible as something separate by himself, beside the human course of events. We have his word to speak, out into "the wind from the four winds"; that is all. This is what is remarkable: just as God by the Word created the world, so God's continued speech through human voices brings about ordinary world-history, and not a separate spiritual, bodiless history.

But — this shall be the last thing this evening, and with that the whole Ezekiel text receives its address: If we speak the word that God commands us to speak, we do not need to be many. At need it is enough that one is a single one, a child of man, if only one does not keep silent. Does not keep silent. The whole of history is full of examples of what power lies in truth even when it is a few who utter it. Therefore this Ezekiel text seeks, this evening, a single one, a "child of man," in Immanuel Church. Her place here in the room we do not know — perhaps a young person, whose voice no public has yet heard, and who now most nearly feels terror at the thought that "it could be I"! It is on obedience and patience and endurance that everything hangs, endurance even when the fruit of all the toil at first looks like a dead skeleton without spirit. The last word this evening shall be Jeremiah 15:19, one of the Old Testament's finest prophetic words, a divine promise once directed to a young and weak and solitary human

being: “If you bring forth noble metal without dross, you shall get to serve me as a mouth____. And I will make you, before this people, a firm wall of copper.”

Let us give thanks and pray! Blessed be God, who by his word has comforted, taught, admonished, and warned us. Establish now, by your Spirit, the word in our hearts, so that we do not become forgetful hearers, but daily grow, in faith, hope, love, and patience, all life long, and become blessed. Through Jesus Christ, who is our Lord. Amen.

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SOURCE

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