

Reflection Notes – 2/4/17

- Geoff Stevenson

Can These Bones Live???

Through this season of Lent I have referred to the theme of water quite often. I also mentioned wind a few weeks ago – that the Spirit of God is like wind that blows where it will. This week water and wind came together with tumultuous and destructive force and affect. The cyclone, Debbie, that devastated Northern Queensland and the impact of which has been felt in major flooding through southern Queensland and northern NSW blew through our land. Wind and water are vital to our life on this planet but the raw power of nature's uncontrolled fury is quite staggering and sobering. The images of devastation are bewildering, as are the stories of people who lived through this catastrophic event. I find the stories overwhelming and incomprehensible, having never experienced such raw power and uncontrollable forces. Now there is vast flooding and a massive clean-up operation. There are people who are despairing and confused, who have lost much or don't know where to begin in rebuilding their homes, farms and lives.

Amidst the water and mess is desolation and tears, courageous people standing their ground and those who are looking for some hope for the future. All the resources at the disposal of governments, service organisations and charities, including many churches, have been released to provide the immediate and long-term help and support that these communities need. We know that towns and cities, homes and lives can and will be rebuilt. We have the capacity to rebuild much of that which has been lost. That doesn't deny the pain and suffering of so many people but points to the reality that we have capacity to rebuild lives that experience such devastation.

In other places where there are other stories of hurting people and broken lives, rebuilding may not be so easy. For those who have lost friends or families in these floods and cyclone, a return to what was is impossible. Throughout our world there are many such places where the pain and torment that people experience cannot be undone, rebuilt or restored to what was. In towns, cities and nations where warfare and terrorism occupies the centre stage, the pain and suffering is incomprehensible. Innocent and vulnerable people seek to escape and find refuge in merciful places. Others are caught in conflict and bear the wounds – sometimes even unto death. Frightened and damaged people flood out of homelands in search of peace and safety for themselves and their families. Others join the fight, allowing their rage and fury to be brought to bear on anything or anyone perceived to be enemy and the wars rage on to more devastating effect. Starvation and struggle abounds and the scent of death fills the air. Fear pours out of people's skin and all hell is unleashed.

I cannot conceive of these things, of war with all its hellish horror and evil. I haven't been there and quite frankly don't want to go there. Some have lived through its nightmare and others looked on in the aftermath of broken lives and post-traumatic lives. The impact of war and terrorism on ordinary, innocent people is overwhelming. I received a link this week to the MH17 Memorial in The Netherlands. It commemorates the 298 innocent people in the plane blown up by Russian Separatists in 2014. It comprises trees planted for each of the people – a living reminder of the pain of death and

the struggle of human life in the desolate places where the barrenness of struggle overwhelms and taunts us.

We stand in the shadow of the cross as we edge slowly closer to Good Friday and the story of the world's darkness embraced into the heart of God. It is a black day but one filled with the hopeful yearning that darkness and death is not the whole story, not the end of everything. We look through Good Friday to Easter Day. Sometimes knowing the end of the story at the beginning doesn't help us. We need to experience the journey and reflect upon our own struggle and capture the images of Good Friday's despair, grief and pain within our own experience and that of the world in which we live. We need to be there before this wretched cross as it symbolises the dark despair and desolation that comes us in parts of our lives and fills so much life in our world.

As we journey closer to this dark cross, we encounter stories along the way. This week there are 2 such stories. The first is a strange and confusing story told by John (John 11:1-45). It is the story of the raising of Lazarus, a resuscitation of a man dead. It is a confusing and strange story filled with all manner of odd twists, turns and puzzling detours. Ultimately there is death in a tomb surrounded by grief and in the midst of this lifeless community Jesus proclaims life. He calls into the tomb that surrounds and contains death and says: 'Come out Lazarus!' Lazarus still bound in the clothes of death stumbles out and the people are told to unbind him. Life arises out of death and overwhelms the hopelessness that people know in their bones. I wonder where and how we might encounter the words of Jesus, 'Come out!' I wonder how and where we might be still and quiet enough to hear words of life exhort us to give up death and all its ramifications and pain to live anew in God's grace? What might this mean?

In the second story an Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, speaks of a vision (Ezekiel 37:1-11). His homeland has been devastated by warfare at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The king and his army has destroyed the city of Jerusalem, along with its wall and Temple. The leading citizens and craftsmen have been taken off to Babylon and exist in exiled helplessness. The mourn and grieve their homeland and the images of catastrophic death and destruction linger in their minds. The Babylonian army was brutal and nothing was left. The Jewish armies lay as lifeless bodies strewn across the valley and there is nothing to hope in.

Ezekiel's vision takes him into such a place where dry bones lay lifeless through a desolate valley. God confronts the prophet in the vision asking if these bones can live? Can they? Can our bones live? When we face catastrophe and desolation in life we may ask of ourselves or of others: 'Can these bones live?' Can they breathe again? Can there be life, breath or even laughter ever again? In the vision Ezekiel is told to tell the bones to re-form and then for sinews and muscle and skin to form around the bodies and the wind of God's Spirit blows through the valley rattling bones and bringing life. When the remarkable event is over the breath of God breathes life into the bodies and they live! God tells Ezekiel that this valley represents the nation of Israel, lifeless, hopeless and futile. BUT, God will breathe new life into the nation and life will flood into their being. It will take time and there will be a journey and struggle. It will require courage and work but life will come because God is in their midst. God is in our midst, whether the threat is wind, water or something else. God is with us! God breathes life into our communities!