

I wonder how are you at goodbye's or letting go?

At tea and chat on Friday one of the conversations was things we keep in our homes which are no longer needed, or we think we might create into something else, that 20 years later are still in a box collecting dust.

On Thursday night the Archdeacon in his charge to the new Church Wardens of Brent said that for a faith which is based on the promise of death and resurrection, as communities we are often not so good at death. That is, we are not very good at letting go of programs or things or ideas that have had their day, and so limiting new groups, new initiatives to grow.

It is not just the church which struggles with this, so often as wider communities or even as households letting go, moving on, adapting to change can be a very difficult thing.

On Friday night, I was able to sit and watch the final episode of The Big Bang Theory (something I will find hard to let go of!). It has been a really enjoyable sitcom, which I have loved watching and will really miss. The final episode however focused a great deal on the changes which had taken place in the characters lives over ten years. One of the leads, Sheldon who lives with Asperger's syndrome and really struggles through the whole series with coping with big events and change as a whole - in fact there was one season when he ran away because there was too much change. One of the lovely moments in the final episode was him growing to realise that we all change, that he had changed, and that without that change some amazing things would not have happened.

So often it is not so much the change or difference that is difficult, but the anxiety or fear related to losing the familiar. Two of our readings today directly address this fear - whether physical or figurative - as things change. Sometimes however we can lose sight of what might be possible as we are overwhelmed by the present.

Every time I hear this reading from Ezekiel, I think of that strange song from my childhood - *dem bones, dem bones them dry bones*. This image of dry bones being raised took on a whole new meaning for those of us who have read or watched the Game of Thrones - when bones themselves come back to life. But what is the point of this vision in Ezekiel?

Ezekiel is led in a vision to a place of despair and no hope. The valley is full of bodies have been dead a long time, therefore; all that is left of them is the bones, and those are brittle, exposed to the elements. But God instructs Ezekiel to preach life to these bones. It is absurd as it sounds. Ezekiel preaches, talks, shouts to the bones - bones that have had no life for a long time - and as he preaches, they change - they come back to life; and the more he preaches the more life returns.

After this, it is then God's turn to preach to Ezekiel, who will then preach it to the exiles. God is now ready to clarify this elaborate visual metaphor: "these bones," God says, "are the entire house of Israel" (verse 11a). The exiles themselves, according to the Lord, have been saying that their bones were all dried up. God knows the exiles are speaking figuratively since they are also quoted as saying that their hope is gone and that they are completely cut off (verse 11b). But not anymore.

And yet, despite their apparent sense of hopelessness, God doesn't rebut the exiles in the least; instead, the Lord affirms, repeatedly, that the exiles are indeed in "graves" (four times in verses 12-13) -- but graves that God will open up in order to raise them up and return them back to their homeland. Now God is the one who speaks figuratively: these aren't actual graves -- Ezekiel's audience is a live one, though a completely devastated one. And their deaths, their graves, their dashed hopes and feeling of being finished are the complicated result of human disobedience mixed with divine judgment¹.

Ezekiel's vision and message is one of hope to a community which feels overwhelmed by the changes that have been their life during the period of exile.

So often when huge change is upon us we can feel dried up, overwhelmed and even spiritually dead. The message of Ezekiel is do not lose hope, God has not left us to die in the desert, as bones which are forgotten - rather new life is possible, new beginnings, new possibilities. To let go and have faith.

This is the question, in essence, which the disciples are also facing in our gospel reading. What will it be like when you are gone?

Today's gospel forms part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples on the night before his death, a discourse punctuated by the anxious questions of his disciples about his impending departure. First Peter (John 13:36), then Thomas (14:5), then Phillip (14:8), and then Judas (not Iscariot) (14:22) ask for clarification about what Jesus is telling them. Jesus has promised not to leave his disciples orphaned (John 14:18). He has promised to send another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever (14:16) and continue the work that he has begun².

How strange this experience must have felt for the disciples - all their prior experience - what realities do you hold on to?

When we read these texts with the eyes of people who have already the end of the story, it might be hard for us to hear what the disciples are asking. Unlike us they have no idea what Jesus resurrection might look like, they have no experience of what the Holy Spirit might be. We who have read the whole story, and hopefully have had an experience of these things in our own lives, may miss how distressed

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3320

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2838

the disciples are about what Jesus is saying. It is like they are sitting beside Jesus deathbed having these conversations about things they do not understand.

Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for what is to come, he tells them that if they loved him, they would rejoice that he is going to the Father, because the Father is greater than him (John 14:28). It seems understandable that the disciples would not be in a rejoicing mood upon learning that Jesus would soon be leaving them. Jesus tries to reassure them that he is not simply leaving them, but that there is a purpose in his leaving; he is going to be with the Father.

Of course, the danger is that once Jesus goes the disciples return to their old selves, that they do not embrace the changes which Jesus has begun. A setting in which new power paradigms are understood.

Jesus tries to address the disciple's fears by patiently responding to the questions that the disciples raise – but also by pointing out that the spirit God is with them now and will continue to be within them.

I can imagine that the disciples were still not convinced that Jesus' leaving could be a good thing. Jesus says that he is telling them these things now so that when they occur, they will believe. Indeed, it is only after the resurrection, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, that the disciples begin to understand and believe the words of Jesus (John 2:22; 12:16) and are finally able to rejoice (20:20). The whole of John's Gospel manifests the fruits of the Spirit's work among the disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection in deepening their understanding of Jesus' identity and mission³.

I suspect the disciples are not the only ones who sometimes need convincing! The readings which we hear as we come to the end of Easter Season and look towards the story of the Ascension later this week, we are invited to consider where we see the work of the spirit in our lives. To consider what are the situations or attitudes that hold us in places of dry bones, or in fear – and to have the courage to let go of them and to embrace where the spirit is leading us.

We are also invited to consider those things we need to let go of; those things, attitudes, programs, groups, people we are holding on to, who need to be released, to allow each of us to flourish.

At the resurrection Jesus says to Mary, do not hold onto me! She needed to let him go so that the spirit might come, and the story fulfilled. Letting go can be a hard thing – and yet it is a necessary part of our life journey.

The common thing, the sign of hope in all these readings, is that the spirit of God is at work in our midst. Every day and every minute – if we choose to see it.

Today during communion, we are going to listen to a song by Hildegard of Bingen who explored this very thought nearly 1000 years ago – one way she saw the spirit

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2838

was this –

*O noblest green viridity,
you're rooted in the sun
and in the clear
bright calm
you shine within a wheel
no earthly excellence
can comprehend:*

*You are surrounded by
the embraces of the service,
the ministries divine.*

*As morning's dawn you blush,
as sunny flame you burn⁴. Amen.*

⁴ <http://www.hildegard-society.org/2017/04/o-nobilissima-viriditas-responsory.html>