

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 102

Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27, 16:4-15

You shall live

Sermon preached by Peter Blackwood

There are some things that are just too hard to talk about. Some things defy description. Take God for example. How can you talk about God? Our basic senses of sight and hearing and smell and so forth, they can't perceive God, so how can we put language to the divine and how can we tell what God is like?

In the face of this great difficulty many have concluded that there is no God. Millions have come to another conclusion and their conviction has demanded that they find words to tell of their experience of the God they cannot see or hear or taste or smell or feel but who unmistakably is revealed to them, by what means, again, language struggles to make clear.

One form of language that is helpful for explaining the inexplicable is story telling. Philosophers and theologians can give us tightly packed arguments that help us understand who God is but the story teller philosopher and the theologian who spins a yarn is also the purveyor of truth.

St Luke was such a theologian. When he told the story of God coming among the friends of Jesus as a rushing wind and as tongues of fire the story teller preacher was at his best. But is that what really happened, those things Luke said about 3,000 converts in one hit? Maybe they did. John's gospel describes the giving of the Spirit differently so one or both of them could be wrong in the details, but each is describing a truth through a story. What is the truth about God that Luke is saying in his dramatic and energetic story?

Well, Luke is starting by saying that God is dramatic and energetic. He also deals with the delicate issue of how God seems to be revealed to some people and not to others, or that some people perceive God and others make fun of those who do. So Luke tells of a house filled with wind and flames alighting on the disciples.

In this scene there is the inner group of Jesus followers who are the ones who receive the Spirit of God and there are all the others. The idea of 'them and us' is a very uncomfortable one for Luke who understands that in Jesus Christ God intends that all people come within God's rescue plan. He cannot get away from the fact that some people know God and others don't so those who do go all out to make God, who was known to them in Jesus, and who is alive in them through this gift of the Spirit, – to make God known to all other people. Luke is very particular about who this means. He includes in his story of drama and energy the strange phenomenon of people understanding speech across all the linguistic barriers. People from all nations and tongues can receive this gift. This is not a 'them and us' situation. This is a for everyone event. Bringing different national groups together was a vital issue for Luke. His understanding of who God is includes the idea that God made all people and desires all people to be reconciled to God and to each other. He understood that part of the task of the followers of Jesus is to make this known to all people and that God would be in that task breaking down the barriers.

So why would Luke have been so interested in God and race relations? Was it just a disembodied theological concept, that because God made all people, all people should be reconciled to one another. Why should that follow? Why not allow that different races have their different places where God put them? Let them get on with each other in their own places? No! In our experience and in Luke's experience it simply does not work that way. Race relations were as much an issue and a threat to world peace for Luke and his world as it is for us and our world. He saw minority groups oppressed by occupying forces. He saw attempts at ethnic cleansing. He and his church experienced separation from family roots and alienation from their spiritual homelands.

Luke was convinced that reconciliation between all people was God's will and the Spirit's power to achieve and that God called men and women into that ministry of reconciliation.



Over the years Rob Gallacher and I have had requests to provide photos of icons for the front cover of the devotional aid *With Love to the World*. A few years ago I was asked for a photo for the Pentecost edition. The result is on the front of today's order of service. *With Love to the World* is a publication of the Uniting Church. One of the characteristics of the Uniting Church is that it is made up congregations of different ethnicities. On a festival occasion when the church hears again the story of the power of the Holy Spirit enabling people of all languages to hear Peter's sermon I wanted to find a way to celebrate our church's diversity and a unity found by the pouring of the Spirit. In the icon Peter stands holding words from Joel 2:18, 'God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh'. Peter stands on a kind of pavement made

up of translations of that text in some of the languages of ethnic congregations of the Uniting Church – Tongan, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean and Tamil and Garrwa, spoken by First Peoples of Australia living near the Gulf of Carpentaria's coastline.

Back when the icon was painted I offered it as a prayer of thanks for a unity found in diversity. Today it is offered in a world tearing itself apart because of its diversity, where nations head towards Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones. Can current conflicts end in any other way than death? Ezekiel's vision poses our questions; '[God] said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."' (Ezekiel 37:3)

As I use this word of Scripture to offer a word of hope from God, I am conflicted. Ezekiel offered his word to Israel in Babylon's captivity. If the icon of Peter at Pentecost is a prayer as proclaimed by Joel declaring that God's Spirit will be poured out on ALL flesh, then Ezekiel's vision must address today's world rather than an ancient time. The context for this Scripture needs translation to our time. Also, it is word that needs to be addressed to people rather than to nations and their governments. In answer to the question, 'Can these bones live?' God says, 'you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live ...' (Ezekiel 37:13f). My prayer is that this be a word of hope - for Israelis and Palestinians, for Ukrainians and Russians, for all victims of aggression and their perpetrators. To them, and to us, God says, 'you shall live.'
