

What's In A Word?

5th Sunday of Lent, March 29, 2020

In the Eucharistic Prayer that we pray most Sundays, we hear these beautiful words:

*"We give thanks to you... for the goodness and love you have made known to us ... in creation... in your **Word** (spoken through the prophets) ... and above all ... in the **Word** (made flesh, Jesus your Son.)"*

Divine goodness & Divine love (the things we all most want, and need to be sure of) ... are beyond words. And yet, they are "made known" to us — experienced & understood by us — through special kinds of **words**. When we're gazing at a sunrise on the lake, and (*either silently or aloud*) we say "**Ahhhhhhh...**" — that "**Ahhhhhhh...**" is a **word**, understood in any language, a special kind of word that signifies we are in the presence of an awesome goodness & beauty, which are pure "gift." It's a word for something that is "beyond words" — like the word "God."

Words are powerful things. Words are "containers" of thoughts & feelings. Words "organize" our minds through the "conversations" we are always having with ourselves. Words make meaning in our minds. When spoken aloud, words **convey** meaning back & forth between one person & another. We are always immersed in words, both from within & without — like fish are always immersed in water. And so, we naturally come to "**not notice**" their continual presence in our lives. We naturally come to take words for granted, because they are just "*always there*" in one way or another.

Words put the things that happen to us, and within us, and around us into a larger, meaningful context. Words **create** context. Even the "**Ahhhhhhh...**" that we voice either silently or aloud — puts the sunrise into a larger, spiritual context — where it's no longer just a "bare" physical fact that's happening in the sky. Metaphorically, we might say that the sunrise "**speaks**" to us, even though we know that sunrises can't "*talk*." But God can talk, and speak to us, through the sunrise — so that it becomes for us a powerful "sign" of divine goodness & love.

In our first reading, the Spirit of God leads the mind of Ezekiel to envision himself sitting in the center of a vast valley, full of human bones. And the bones are very dry, bleached white by the sun.

It goes without saying that "bare bones," even a whole valley full, are "speechless." Bones don't "talk." Maybe if an archeologist (or some other mindful observer) were to analyze them, the bones could "*speak*" and "*tell us their story*." But we all realize that this is just a metaphor. The bones themselves aren't speaking — it's the mindful observer who puts his or her findings **into words**, that give the bones "a voice" and tell their story. Without this mindful observer, the bones can't say or do anything... but continue being bleached & dried by the sun until, eventually, they turn to dust.

But **through the power of words...** a valley of dry bones can become a very meaningful context. Words "**create**" context. And, for us human beings, **context is everything**. Without it, all we have are bare facts, which actually **don't** "*speak for themselves*." As we grow, and become more mindful observers, we learn through experience that **nothing** happens "*outside*" of a context. And so we **insist** on knowing more than just the bare facts of the things that happen. We want to know what/when/where/who/how & why. (*Just think of the many conversations you had with your kids when they were teenagers: "Who **else** was there Johnny? And what did **you** say, when he said that to you?"*) We need to know the larger context — and so we don't stop questioning... until we get "the whole story."

So here is Ezekiel — within his mind — sitting in the center of a valley full of dry bones. It conjures up a curious picture in our minds. It's not yet a meaningful context— just bizarre, uncanny. But that quickly changes, as Ezekiel engages in an inner dialogue with God (the **ultimate** Mindful Observer.) Through their exchange of words, the context becomes very meaningful indeed. God doesn't do an archeological analysis of the bones (*although I'm sure the Discovery Channel would pay big bucks for that.*) Instead, thru well chosen words in their dialogue, God leads Ezekiel to understand the "*spiritual context*" of the bare facts he's perceiving. God cuts to the chase and says to him: "**Ezekiel, these dry bones that you see are the Whole House of Israel. For Israel is saying, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'**"

In these few special words, God tells Ezekiel "the whole story" of his vision of himself, sitting in the *Valley of Dry Bones*. Metaphorically, we could say that **by opening up Ezekiel's understanding — by putting what he is seeing into its larger spiritual context** — God is making the bones "speak," letting the bones "tell their story." The point is that through this dialogue with God, Ezekiel's point of view, his "inner horizon", expands... so that he can hear what God is hearing: the silent, suffering voice of the People of Israel. The voice of a people who feel utterly abandoned, "cut off" from all that is good, and thus, without hope. And this sense of abandonment & hopelessness they're experiencing is sucking the life out of them — demoralizing them — so that they're withering away "like bones" in the hot desert sun. They are beyond panic. Their panic has burned them out and left them in despair. At this point in the dialogue, God doesn't actually say it like this, but God is essentially asking Ezekiel: **"Do you get the picture?"**

It's only when, along with Ezekiel, we "get the picture" that the vision... and the prophetic call.... are not to be taken literally.... that they start to make meaningful sense:

"Prophesy to these dry bones, Ezekiel, and say to them: Hear the word of the LORD: 'I will lay sinews on you, and cause flesh to grow upon you, and cover you with skin. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So will I put breath in you, and you shall live, and shall know — that I am the LORD, your God.'"

I don't for a moment want to "modernize away" the beauty & power of this biblical prophecy... but I think it's also helpful for us to understand it from our own, more modern, perspective. In today's terms, we would say that the People of Israel were experiencing a severe mental health crisis — and they were losing their capacity to cope & function well. Ezekiel's call is to carry the "antidote" to them — to calm (*and to prove wrong*) their fears of utter abandonment. And **how** is Ezekiel to do this? Through words. Through dialogue. Through carrying to the People of Israel the powerful, inspired, healing & edifying words that he hears God speaking — to help them **understand** their current crisis in its broader, spiritual context. **Do we get the picture?**

In 2020, we've suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a physical health crisis. And we're being called to recognize that — as this **physical** crisis is responded to in **psychologically** unhelpful ways — it can foster the same kind of widespread mental health problems that the People of Israel were facing in the time of Ezekiel. People haven't changed that much fundamentally. I've heard it said so often in these last few weeks that it's almost becoming a cliché — *but it's true* — "Panic spreads even faster than a virus..." (like COVID-19.)

Panic **also** gives rise to powerful words (whether they're spoken inwardly or aloud). Words like *"We're utterly defenceless; we're completely without help; and we're all going to die."* And panic can also be "incited" in the first place through the use of such powerful words. Words that immobilize & demoralize.... and sometimes take it even further... and "demonize" those the speaker blames as the **cause** of our panic — as Mr. Trump is now doing in his talks & tweets by refusing to call COVID-19 anything but *"the Chinese virus."* The powerful words of panic **also** create a "larger context" in people's minds, in which the "bare facts" of the coronavirus can be understood. But the context that the words of panic create in people's minds is very misleading & harmful. Words are powerful things.

So where is God in all of this?

God is calling God's people (*not just formally religious folk, but all those who listen for God's always-redemptive & nonviolent voice.*) God is calling us **all** to take a stand. A prophetic stand. A stand no less holy & important than the one taken by the prophet Ezekiel (*even though our prophetic stands will likely be less grand & dramatic.*) We are being called to be "preventers" & "diffusers" of panic, and — in the same breath — "purveyors" of peace. **How are we to do this?** In the same way that Ezekiel did. Through words. Through the private, "inner" dialogues that we have with ourselves & with God, and through the public, "outer" dialogues that we have with other people. In our dialogues with God, we receive the "antidotes" to panic & despair — the inspiring, enlightening, edifying words of God. *We are not alone. We are not abandoned. We are not defenceless. God is with us, here & now, anointing us with the Holy Spirit, in the midst of this valley of crisis.* When we inwardly hear these truths, and are inwardly freed from our own panic & despair, we are in a position to carry these "antidotes," these healing words of God, to others who need them. The words God speaks help us (*and those with whom we speak*) to **understand** this current crisis in its broadest, and most beneficial, context.

"We are not alone. We are not abandoned. God is with us." However these truths may be put into words, they are not easy to perceive when, like the People of Israel, all we feel is abandoned, alone, and at high risk of harm or death. When people are stuck in such a dismal place, it takes a prophetic word to penetrate it. A word that gently cuts through illusions and plants its truth in their minds. But the form in which such prophetic words come to us in daily life is rarely as colourful & dramatic as the forms they take in the Bible. We might be in the supermarket, on the phone, or just talking over the backyard fence, when someone shares a word with us that alters our point of view, puts everything into a higher, helpful context.

And these modern prophets rarely preface what they say with *"Thus saith the Lord of Hosts..."* (at least not in **my** neighborhood.) And they don't seem to be "under pressure" to say something perfect, priceless, and profound. They are just being themselves.

Whether fancy or plain, what makes a word "prophetic" is where it comes from & what it accomplishes. The Holy Spirit is at work within every mind on the planet. And in those that are open & sensitive to that work in a given moment — the thoughts they think and words they speak are prophetic — whether they consciously know it or not. It's often just one of those wonderful *"Where did **that** come from?"* moments — where a wisdom & compassion that are *"beyond us"* just seem to flow out of our mouths. It's not about memorizing catchy spiritual phrases, but about being open & sensitive to the work of the Spirit within us & through us. The Spirit can move through any receptive person.

So when you find yourself in conversation with someone you sense is struggling with the emotional impact of this crisis — and maybe even starting to slide down that slippery slope to panic & despair — see it as providential. See God in it.

God is seeking to inwardly calm — **you** — down. God is seeking to speak a healing, reorienting word into — **your** — heart & mind, for **your** good. Then, in some simple way, you can pass it on to the one who is struggling. If they can't take it in, if they seem to be dragging you down that slippery slope with them, then it's time to wish them "all peace" & move on... (or at least to change the subject to something less loaded, like the weather.) You've done your best to lead them to good water; your job isn't to make them drink. But for many who are struggling, such simple, prophetic words will foster genuine hope in their hearts & minds. And genuine hope does not disappoint. Genuine hope **also** spreads faster than any virus — and penetrates far deeper than fear or despair.

Let us pray.

Breathe on us, Holy One. And breathe upon all those caught in panic or despair in this present health crisis, so that like the "dry bones" in the vision of Ezekiel, they may spiritually come back to life & flourish.

Make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, enable us to sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy; where there is darkness, light.

We ask these things in the powerful name of Christ, the Living Word, whose Spirit is always inwardly teaching & guiding us toward the very best response.

Amen

Fr. Shaun Eaton, Rector
St. John in the Wilderness
Brights Grove, Ontario