



Gustav Doré's Valley of the Dry Bones

Many scholars have noted that with Pentecost, God is administering his antidote for the curse of Babel. You will remember in Genesis Chapter 11, man defied God's command to go forth and fill the whole earth. (See Gen.1:28, 9:7) Instead, man decided to congregate together in a great city, and build a tower up to heaven itself. Thus man tried to make God of himself, an ambition that sadly many seek to fulfill even today with self-centered ambitions that take no account of the welfare of others. Yes, some people even today are building their own tower of Babel.

So, to save man from himself God had to come down and confound that particular civil-engineering project. And God confused Babel's builders by placing into their minds and mouths multiple languages so that they could not understand one another. But with Pentecost, God undoes the curse of Babel. There is still the rich array of different languages, and yet this time with the gift of the Holy Spirit there is communication, and understanding,

and harmony. The identity of man has not changed; we humans are still vastly different from each other. But with Pentecost, these differences are no longer a source of confusion and chaos. With Pentecost these differences have become a fount of enrichment, enlightenment, and community.

Why? What is the cause of this new-found harmony? Why has what was once a source of dysfunction, even destruction been so transformed? What has changed to bring about this new life in fellowship with one another?

It is, of course, the Holy Spirit. With Pentecost God has poured down upon his children a portion of himself in the form of His Spirit. And the Spirit provides such a change in the nature of man, that the destructive curse of Babel born of man's pride, is erased. Because the prophecies of Isaiah and Joel have been fulfilled. The time has indeed come when the lord God pours out His Spirit among all flesh, and God's people will dream, and prophecy, and finally see with the eyes of the heart. (See Is.44:3; Joel2:8; Eph.1:18) And what is this Spirit like? Well, the primary characteristics of the Holy Spirit certainly embrace a profound trait of inclusivity. The Spirit is nothing if not inclusive. There are no barriers the Spirit cannot cross to bring God's people together. There is no secret handshake necessary to join the club of believers, save the open hand of welcome. There is no special password to enter this fraternity, but the one name that makes us members, the mighty name of Jesus which is available to all.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is quintessentially inclusive, excluding no one from His company. And this is what I believe Paul is trying to tell us in his letter to the Romans this morning when he proclaims that the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God, with sighs too deep for words, when we do not know how to pray as we ought. (See Rom.8:27, 26) Evidently, this fellowship of believers that you and I casually call "church" is something much mightier and more mysterious than many of us have come to believe. In fact, the kind of company of the saints that God would have as His "church" is so wondrous a thing that, evidently human language cannot even describe its beauty, and the Spirit must step in to aid us. That's the beautiful thing the church is really supposed to be as God would have it. And this fellowship, which none other than the Creator God has envisioned is nothing if not exquisitely inclusive, barring no one from its assembly. For as Jesus has clearly told us, He was lifted high upon the cross that **all the world** might be drawn to Him. (See Jn.12:32)

This morning's passage from Ezekiel 37 is a prophecy of God's redemption of His people. There are at least three characteristics of this account which are, it seems to me, hallmarks of an act of God. First, God instructs his prophet to do something that doesn't make any earthly sense. This happens all the time in the Bible, and in real life as well. Can you imagine how Noah's friends must have laughed at him for wasting his time building a giant barge? And what must Peter's friends have thought about him leaving behind the family business in order to follow this weirdo from Nazareth? And if the instructions from God to his disciples often make no earthly sense, another hallmark of God's hand working in our world seems to be performing acts beyond human hope. Notice how Ezekiel isn't asked to go out and prophecy to someone who is recently gravely ill or dead in the hope of revival. No, God's prophet is instructed to go and prophecy to a valley of dry bones. These remains have been without any life or hope for years it would seem... Now, how could anyone in their right mind hope to accomplish anything useful by placing themselves in a situation of such utter hopelessness? But, you see, that's exactly the way God works, when all human hope has ceased to be... And finally, if one characteristic of the hand of God working is that His methods don't make much sense in human terms; and if a second characteristic of God at work in the world is his intervention in a plight which seems beyond hope; one more trait of the divine at work in our world is the inexplicable manner in which salvation comes.

There's no human force, no skilled surgeon who could have caused these old dry bones to rattle together and cloth themselves with flesh and sinew and start to live again. Only God could have done that. And this is the final, unmistakable trait of God at work in our world-the fact that when The Lord wants to testify to His presence among His children, frequently that hallmark will be unmistakable in the inexplicable nature of God's solutions for His children's adversities. His ways are truly higher than the heaven is above the earth. So, God's solutions are inevitable beyond any reasonable earthly explanation –although sceptics will go to such great lengths to explain away the mercies and grace of God abounding in this world.

And so, through an act of God, what was for years nothing more than dry bones has been covered again in living flesh and clothed anew, in the skin of those who are alive. That's the kind of revival and resuscitation so many of us want for our lives. That's the kind of vital life your Rector wants for this Church. Ah, but here we see the birth of a metaphor! Because just as these old dry bones in the valley of death are once again clothed in living skin, I suppose that to participate in this kind of revival and revitalization, you have to have some skin in the game. It's not enough to simply come to this Church on a semi-regular basis. Worship, real worship of the living God isn't an occasional spectator sport. Oh, no! You need to be committed to your church family to truly be faithful; you have to have some skin in the game. Regular, committed presence in a church as a vibrant yet routine part of your life may be inconvenient from time to time: it's *supposed* to be. Because you're supposed to have some skin in the game. Yes, being here on Sunday - and yes I mean each Sunday - being in this place to worship the risen Lord may in fact requires you to miss some other functions and activities on occasion. It should. Because if you're really going to be a Christian who practices what he proclaims and walks what she talks, you need to have some skin in the game. Yes, being a faithful witness to the vital nature of worship does mean regular tithing, even though sadly some folks end up depositing a lot more of their treasure in their golf game or fishing tackle than in their church. Well, it shouldn't be that way, not if you have skin in the game. But then again, I guess it just depends on where your priorities lie. And to take this a step farther, I believe there's another kind of commitment that we as true Christians are called to make, that has very little to do with time or treasure. You may not have thought about this one.

I know that most of the people in this Church have thought about tithing your treasure and you're time. In fact, may have thought a lot about that. But there's another kind of tithing that it seems to me we have to make, if we are truly to be members of that same body of believers envisioned by St. Paul in his letters to the Corinthians. Because a real "church" the true body of Christ takes us to another level of charity.

Along with that monetary percentage of my first fruits, and a regular, disciplined commitment of my time to the worship of God, I wonder: Am I also willing to give up a portion of what I consider to be the 'right' kind of worship? Am I willing to sacrifice a part of what makes me comfortable and content in my pew on Sunday morning so that someone else may be spiritually nourished that day, even if the worship experience is a little less like what I would want? Am I willing to give up a tithe of what I believe is "meaningful worship music" so that someone else with tastes different from my own might be spiritually fed that day? Am I able to relinquish just a portion of my expectations, even if it means doing things a little differently from "Tweehabdo"? Am I willing to give up just a little of my "Tweehabdo"? You know, "Tweehabdo" T W I H A B DO: "the-way-it- has-always-been-done." Am I willing to sacrifice just a little of my deeply held traditions in order that people with expectations different from my own might be welcomed and involved in the body of Our Lord and Savior? Am I willing to tithe a part of my expectations along with my checkbook, so that I may truly be worshiping in what was always meant to be "*Ecclesia*"— the church, that mystical body of those who practice a commitment of servant-hood, or putting the welfare of others above our own, the wondrous house of selfless love which Our Lord died and rose again to create? Am I willing to make a tithe of my expectations, in order to foster and support the faith journey of someone else? Because that is surely key to the Christian witness.

At the very end of his proclamation at Pentecost, the Apostle Peter assures us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."(Acts2:21) Ah yes, but are we willing to call Him Lord and mean it? Because with the coming of the Holy Spirit, we are all given the ability to do just that. With Pentecost, we are all finally enabled to love selflessly and fully the way God always intended. But that decision, to make Him Lord of your life and love those around you completely, that is, in the end, a choice only you can make!

In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Blessed Pentecost. Amen. JWB+ 5/14/18