



# Church in a Bag

## Sunday 23 May

Dubbo Uniting Church



### A Gathering

Celebrations – in my family, this day marks the birthday of my sister, Jean; the marriage to Don Haling of my sister Gill; and the birth of my nephew Neil Geoffrey Haling.

Pentecost marks a day of celebration for the people of the Christian Church, as all over the world we gather. Why? Because we believe that it was at this moment that the Spirit of God breathed new life into the disciples, re-creating them, changing them from frightened people into courageous messengers, prepared to take the Good News into the world.

### Preparation

In Hebrew, the word *ruach* means spirit, breath and wind, so there is a very strong link between the story of the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones and the actuality of what happened at Pentecost – where the people who followed Christ took the Jewish celebration Shavuot (fifty days from the time of the Passover) and changed it. These are stories of re-creation, of the power and the grace of the breath of God.



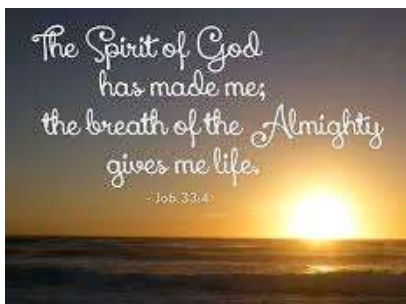
## Readings: Ezekiel 37:1–14 Acts 2:1–21

The Ezekiel story is not one of horror but rather one of hope. The breath of God restores us to life.



## Reflection

Ezekiel was one of the people of Jerusalem, deported to Babylon about 597 BCE. For these exiles when ten years later Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, it seemed that this wasn't just about physical suffering but a loss of faith. Everything they had believed in had been destroyed: Jerusalem, its Temple, the families and friends left behind, the Davidic monarchy. They thought that their God had been defeated by the stronger gods of Babylon. They wondered whether the Lord was truly Lord and truly faithful to them, the chosen people.



The story told in many of the Psalms is one of lament, of bones wasting away, shaking with terror, burning in a furnace. Ezekiel's vision is a poetic and prophetic response to their feeling of hopelessness, of being cut off not just from their homeland and their Temple, but from God. They

were dry bones, lifeless. Before anything could happen, Ezekiel had to prophesy. He had to say to the bones "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord". Then God said to those dried out bones "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live" just as God had breathed life into Adam.

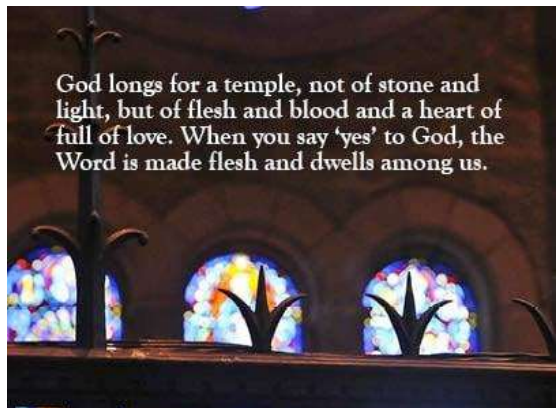
Ezekiel's vision is the prophetic message of deliverance (also called the 'oracle of salvation'). As is well known, the prophets were messengers sent from God sometimes with messages of judgment, calls to repentance, and admonitions to obedience. At other times – and this is

the case in Ezekiel 37 – the prophets were sent with good news. The summary of Ezekiel’s good news is found in verses 12-14, which culminates with these words: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil.” Ezekiel’s message is the promise that God’s spirit will reach out and bring the people back from exile. Which, of course, eventually happened.

So, centuries later, we have the disciples: once hiding in fear, thinking they too would be condemned to death or imprisonment as followers of Jesus; now, having seen the risen Lord coming out of hiding and preparing for mission.

*They gather together in one place - and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:2-4)*

The disciples go public, taking advantage of the great gathering of both the local and the dispersed Jews who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate, no longer men afraid, now men determined to face the world, to proclaim Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. Like the dry bones of the Ezekiel vision they have been restored to life.



In this world of seemingly unending tragedy, of fear, hopelessness, exile, discrimination, of the imbalances of power, where do we stand? Are we reaching out as the Church, as prophets, as proclaimers of hope?

## A song to sing or to read: Drive Us Out

When the carpenter's son went to the Jordan; was baptised by John  
you came down in the form of a dove  
"This is my son" said a voice from above  
After you blessed him you drove him and tested him  
forty days wandering far from the town  
Would he seek power and fame? Would he just play the game?  
Trusting in your word he stared temptation down.

*Refrain* So drive us out of our safe little spaces  
lead us to wisdom in wilderness places.  
Burn like a flame in our stony cold hearts.  
Blow through the walls of our fear that keep us apart. Oh oh Oh oh.

Then he spread the good news:  
God's reign approaching for Gentiles and Jews.  
'Follow me' both women and men.  
Children and sinners and outcasts his friends.  
Your love flowed out from him healing, forgiving sin  
challenging rules that kept people apart.  
Your holy fire drove him clearing the Temple den  
Making a house of true prayer would need a new start. *Refrain*

When Jesus had gone: died and then risen then lifted beyond  
You came down like a great rushing wind.  
Set them a-fire your church to begin.  
Give us the words to say here in our world today  
just like the twelve in Jerusalem.  
Advocate for us now, guide us and show us how  
help us to witness to love again and again. *Refrain*

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## Closing Prayer

Creator Spirit and Giver of life, make the dry, bleached bones of our lives live and breathe and grow again as you did of old. Pour out your Spirit upon the whole creation. Come in rushing wind and flashing fire to turn the sin and sorrow within us into faith, power, and delight. Grant that, gathered and directed by your Spirit, we may confess Christ as Lord and combine our diverse gifts with a singular passion to continue his mission in this world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, go out and take the Good News of love and life into the world. Amen

**With thanks to Shirley Colless for preparing today's reflection**