

The Reverend J. A. Robinson-Brown

***Holy God, bless Thy people.
Break Thy word among us, as bread for the feeding of our famished souls.
Make fallow the ground upon which we stand.
Speak Thy truth unto our hearts, that we may leave this moment renewed and changed.
Now Lord, help me, Thy preacher.
Breathe on my words and make them thine.
Hide me behind Calvary's cross –
That a new relationship might be established between each of us, and the Saviour.
To the Glory of Thy Holy Name.
Amen.***

One day, after a morning service in my Mother Church, a Methodist Church in West London – a man came up to me and posed a question that changed the direction of my life...

“Jarel, have you ever thought about preaching?”

That question was asked of a young, timid 13 year old boy. Who came to Church week by week, refused to go to Sunday School and sat through the services with his Windrush Generation grandmother who had settled in that Church many years prior.

The person who asked the question was himself a preacher – Mr Graham Preedy who, for years, preached in the Methodist Churches in the Ealing Trinity Circuit.

Graham, like the holiest of people, always lived with a word of encouragement on his lips, and a twinkle in his eye – radiating the joy of the Gospel, making no distinction between Saint or Sinner as he went about his life. God's Word, really was a lamp to his feet and a light to his path...

And we, who Sunday by Sunday, were privileged to hear him break open the Word could see that in him was the spirit of God – speaking to us.

There were days when Mr Preedy would take us from our West London suburb, and lead us up a great height. Such that he led us step by step, moment by moment up a steep yet steady mountain...and, reaching the top of our own personal Mount Tabor, or Ararat, or Sinai, Mr Preedy would simply point – and there ahead of us, blazing, was the most awesome, life-changing, inextinguishable fire...and we, from all our different backgrounds, with all our different burdens, and all our varied and diverse stories and scars – our hopes and dreams and fears – our weary souls and our defiant longings - we would gather around that fire – and learn its name...and like the Christians in Acts 28, receiving the intimate hospitality of the people of Malta, we would all catch something of its warmth.

And you know, the more we were lead to that place, that mountain peak, felt like home – it was the place where we knew ourselves to be those on the road to eternity - because Mr Preedy, in his preaching and his living – led us deeper into the mystery of God.

And very simply friends –

That, is the task and privilege of preaching.

That we, who are preachers, broken – unprepared – in need of our own conversion...

Are able to lead God’s people, deeper into the mystery that loved them into being.

The task in which you and I share, or maybe the task in which you one day hope to share – is the most awesome privilege that there is.

To be a spokesperson for God. A conduit to God’s purposes. An avenue through which, the truth that is ours – crucified, risen and ascended – lives, moves and has its being in our troubled and chaotic world.

Make no mistake, it is an awesome task and no small thing to be an emissary for God – there is really no other way to understand the task of preaching.

We heard in our reading from Ezekiel a word from God not just to the prophet, but to the people around him. But to truly understand what this word means, we need to understand the one who it is given to – and therefore we need to go back to the beginning of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry.

Ezekiel, that prophet who you may remember begins his prophetic life in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month surrounded by myriads of people who are all in exile – loitering it seems by the river Chebar.

And it is there, in that place of exile, that the heavens open and God speaks.

God speaks a word to the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans...and in that first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet looks and sees a great stormy wind coming out of the north, amidst a great cloud of brightness, with flashes of fire and something like gleaming amber!

We hear the word ‘fire’ six times in the first Chapter of Ezekiel. And in the second, our friend Ezekiel finds himself summoned by his maker – told to get up, and stand on his feet – so that God may speak to him.

The experience of God speaking to him was overwhelming. He tells us that a spirit entered into him, an experience so powerful that it ‘set me on my feet’. And what message does God have for him? Not one that any of us would like....

‘I’m sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me....the impudent and stubborn” and you’re going to go to these people, Ezekiel God says....and whether they hear you, or refuse to hear you – they will at least know that a prophet of God has been in their midsts.

In other words, God says, it doesn’t matter how much the people I’m sending you to – pay attention to you – it doesn’t matter how ready they are for your preaching – by your words, by their power – they will know that a person to whom God has spoken – has been speaking to them.

Don’t be like those people, though Ezekiel, God says – open your mouth and eat what I give you!

It’s the strangest of prophetic images, I think...certainly the oddest start – because Ezekiel literally sees a hand coming down from heaven with a scroll in it. With writing on the front and on the back, words of lamentation and mourning and woe. The real stuff of human living. And God says:

‘Eat this – and go, and speak’ fill your stomach with it.

And Ezekiel does so, and the word of God in his mouth, he tells us is ‘sweet as honey’.

Ezekiel comes to know the truth of those words in Deuteronomy, repeated by Jesus – which tell us that we ‘shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord’ (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4)...that Lord who is a consuming fire.

Now, fire is almost certainly *the* prophetic motif – it’s there in the beginning of Ezekiel, and it is in many places throughout the scriptures.

When God reveals himself to Moses, he does so in flames of fire enveloping a bush.

When Elijah (1 Kings 18:38) is challenging the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel – the fire of God descends upon the water-drenched wood and offering – such that all the people fall to their faces and declare themselves to know the presence of God in their midst!

The Prophet Isaiah refers to God’s glory as a burning which will be kindled, like the burning of fire....(Isaiah 10:17) and the Prophet Jeremiah described the word of God as ‘burning fire, shut up in his bones!’ (Jeremiah 20:9)

John the Baptist (Matthew 3:11-12) that great prophet of the Jordan says to the people of his day: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Jesus himself, standing in the great prophetic tradition says in Luke 12:49 ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it was already kindled!’

Yes, it is fire, that symbolizes time and again the presence and purposes of God – at work in creation and at work in us.

Well, friends, I wonder what Ezekiel felt – when he was taken, as we heard in our reading, to that valley of dry bones.

Having had that experience at the beginning of his ministry, of fire and storms, of the very presence of God and of his mouth being filled with the Word of God – how does Ezekiel feel now, I wonder – in that place where God appears to be so absent. Having said yes to God's call, having responded to the summons – only to be taken now to a place where his preaching seems to be a preaching to the dead.

In that place of desolation, that place of death, that place which speaks almost only of despair and decay....

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.”

I don't know about you, but I have preached in contexts that give me an Ezekiel 37 vs 1 vibe...

In 16 years of preaching – there have been days when, after much preparation and labour – God has taken me to a pulpit where literally only two or three have gathered together in the Lord's name.

And I would be lying to you, if I didn't feel as though my labour had been in vain.

That question from Ezekiel 37:3 would occasionally ring in my ears: 'can these bones live?'

Is there life here?

Is this worth it?

Is this really the place and the people amongst whom God wants me to break open the Word?

You know, it might sound controversial, but I really think the biggest question for a preacher - is not do I believe in God? We ought not to be preaching if that were constantly the case.

It's not even the question, do I believe in the Gospel? Hopefully it has found its way into our hearts.

The biggest question for the preacher, is:

Do I believe in preaching?

Because you know, when all the outpourings of our soul evokes no response in our people...
When all our preparation and our labour, and our prayer seems in vain...
When God has taken us as preachers into an Ezekiel 37 context...

What matters most is that we believe in what we are doing, and that we know ourselves to be messengers of our King.

How do we speak, when there is no voice from Sinai – no hand filling our mouths from heaven with any scroll – no power in our pulpit, no fire in our hearts.

How do we speak, when we are so eager to say something new that we prioritise that over saying something that is true...

How do we speak when, being so accustomed to not being listened to – we take the faith once delivered to the saints and turn it into a mild good-will message...when in our studies (or wherever it is that we prepare for our preaching) we reach the 'that'll preach' moment just a bit too soon...when it is perhaps most convenient to us.

There is, poverty in our preaching – the moment we fail to believe in preaching. And most of us fail to believe in preaching, because at times we realise that we have never seen it do anything, or not seen it do very much.

But if preachers are emissaries, if a preacher is a herald of the King – then a preacher goes not with their own word, because that would make them a charlatan – but with the Word of God.

Ezekiel, in the valley of dry bones, prophesied as he was commanded – and we must preach as we have been commanded.

With faith, and with words that have been soaked in prayer – the herald knows the monarch's mind, because the herald knows the monarch in the intimacy of prayer, and the more deeply the herald knows the monarch – the more the herald has to say!

We know that there was fire in Ezekiel's preaching, because actually at times Ezekiel is hard to distinguish from his message. His life became so led by the Spirit, that it is hard to tell where the person stops and where God starts...perhaps that's how our own lives should be as preachers and pastors and prophets too.

Week by week, most of us have the opportunity to say something about God to a group of people who have come to hear us, with a hunger in their heart and a worry in their soul - and who politely sit there and most of the time listen attentively. In this time of plague and anxiety, a time of social and political turbulence, in this time when hearts and minds are wracked with grief and burdened by trauma...as we seek to make it through this valley of death and vale of tears – it is us, preachers, who have the clearest mandate to speak for God.

Do we believe in preaching?

Do we believe in the Gospel?

Do we believe that we do indeed have Good News to share, news that can comfort and convict, news that can change the world, news that can give us hope and transform the darkest depths of our age?

Well, it is true, I think – that people may forget what you say – but they never forget how you made them feel.

About a month ago, Mr Preedy who I spoke of at the beginning, was called to the bosom of Abraham. And so, as one mentored by him, I took the train down to Ealing and went back to my mother Church in Greenford. I was curious to see, if I might catch a glimpse of that inextinguishable blaze just once more...but Mr Preedy's fire had been spent like those Wesleyan preachers who had come before him – like Sarah Crosby, and Mary Barritt-Taft, and Lord Soper and Dr Sangster – our ancestors in the faith who gave their service for the Lord.

The Church was full to the brim – full of people who knew and mourned him...not because he himself had touched our lives, though he had, but more crucially (in the truest sense of that word) because he had shown us the face of Almighty God.

His voice had fallen silent now, there were no more sermons to preach – but what we all knew, and could none of us deny – was that Mr Preedy was a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and he longed for and in fact had made us - witnesses of that same truth too.

That is the task and privilege of preaching – to say to the world, to those to whom we preach, in a way that they cannot deny – the words which all the apostles knew and lived – the heart of the Gospel, the faith of the Church, the fuel in all our fire:

'I, have seen, the Lord!'