

---

# Can These Dry Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-44

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 10, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

---

Some while ago I saw a picture of my own skull. Every now and again physicians decide they need a new photograph for their collection, so they do a CT scan on you. And then you glance over at the screen – and there it is, your very own skull, ugly as hell. You start by thinking it's an idle thing, just a picture. But then you realize, "That's not a thing, it's me! It's a truer picture of me than any smiling photograph." And it stares at you, as if to say, "One day you'll be pared down to this; I'm what you really are, under the skin."

I wonder how you'd feel, coming face to face with your own skull. It makes you shudder. It makes you protest and say, "That's not me – my life has texture, and tenderness, and beauty, and relationship, and sound, and flesh." But the skull says back, "Not for long." And you wonder if you hear a little smirk, or chuckle.

This is what Ezekiel wants us to face up to. The prophet Ezekiel has a vision in which God shows him how things are and talks to him. The setting is a valley. Have you ever stood at the bottom of a deep ravine, and looked up at the cliffs on either side, high above, in front and behind, and thought, "There's no way out of here"? Ezekiel's thinking the same thing. There's no way out of here. I'm in the valley. The valley of death. There's bones everywhere. This is the wreckage of the once mighty people of Israel.

At the Battle of Balaclava, in 1854, during the Crimean war, the six hundred members of the Light Brigade mounted a cavalry charge into a precipitous valley. There was only one problem. The valley was overlooked on three sides by enemy guns. It was a catastrophic mistake. What ensued was a grotesque and wholesale massacre. Alfred Tennyson described the scene in these words.

Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do & die,  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
Volley'd & thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of Hell  
Rode the six hundred.

Ezekiel is transported into the valley of horror, into the jaws of death. But it's even more chilling, because the bones he sees there are *dry*. That means they've been there a while. Israel's dead; it's been dead for a long time; and there's no escape. That's what the valley of the dry bones means. And God asks Ezekiel an absurd question – a question that sums up the Old Testament, the story of the heart of God being yoked to the children of Israel, and the folly of those children and the breaking of that heart. This is the question: "Can these dry bones live?" Israel's bones. Humanity's bones. Creation's bones. Your bones. This is the knife-edge question at the heart of the Bible: "Can these dry bones live?"

The 2004 Swedish film *As it is in Heaven* portrays a gifted orchestral conductor named Daniel. Bullied at his elementary school in northern Sweden, Daniel blossoms in adolescence as a famous and acclaimed musical protégé. But his adult professional career becomes hugely demanding, and he develops debilitating stress-related nasal haemorrhages, resulting in a heart attack on stage in his 30s. Forced to retire, he buys the old elementary school in his native village in snowy northern Sweden, and takes up a simple life. He eavesdrops on the local church choir rehearsal, and finds himself persuaded into becoming their conductor.

In no time his genius galvanizes the choir, and he seeks to give them a whole new outlook on music and on life. At the same time the members of the choir, as they begin to dream, expose all their fragilities. One is enraged by a lifetime of

being teased about his weight. Another can't find a love with her husband that transcends his inhibitions. A middle-aged man finds perfectionism cripples his ability to relate to others. A young woman is left heartbroken after a two-year romance with a man she discovered to be already married. An innocent boy fails to understand why his learning disability means he can't join the choir. And one woman with an angel's voice has a husband who beats her brutally.

The violent husband Conny turns out to be the same bully who tortured Daniel when they were both growing up. In his jealousy of what's happening to his wife, Conny tries to drown Daniel. Meanwhile Stig, the local Lutheran pastor, is equally enraged by the charismatic conductor, and closes down the church choir – only for its members as one body to march down the street to Daniel's house and reinvent themselves as Daniel's choir.

Daniel believes music opens people's hearts. He's alarmed when the choir enters a major international competition at Innsbruck in Austria, because he believes music isn't about winners and losers. But he can see how the prospect inspires the singers, so eventually he agrees to the long journey. He teaches each of the choristers to sing from their souls in a way the judges will never have heard before. In Innsbruck, just before the performance, Daniel has another heart attack and haemorrhage. The choristers, unaware of where he is, carry on without their conductor, singing wordless music from the depths of their being and electrifying the whole auditorium. Judges, other choristers, audience, and everyone present are on their feet, joining in and applauding wildly. Daniel hears the theatre erupt with joy as he dies, alone, in a rest room below.

The story displays how dry bones live. The Swedish village is a valley of dry bones. Each member of the choir is a fragile mass of washed up humanity. Daniel is exhausted, body and soul, a valley of dry bones all in himself. This isn't a story of a village or a choir or a conductor coming back to life. This is about the infusion and discovery of life that was never there before. The song the choir sings at the Austrian festival is a kind of music no one, not they themselves, not Daniel, not the audience or judges, had ever previously heard. The iron grip of the violent Conny and the small-minded Stig had impoverished the village as long as anyone could remember. Now the people had a song in their soul, and that song brought their bodies to life. The dry bones at first clumsily banged against one another; but gradually they found their sinews and muscles and cartilage and flesh and skin and worked out how to live like never before.

Look down at yourself, right now. Is what you see a valley of dry bones? Are parts of you dry – really dry, neglected, abandoned, left for dead? Is your heart a place of carnage and destruction, a valley that's given up reasoning why, but just riding on to do and die, because it's the path of least resistance, because that's what keeps the peace, because you haven't got the strength to imagine anything beyond the valley? Have you given up believing God will ever bring you to life?

Perhaps you have friends, associates, colleagues, peers, like the choristers in the movie had one another. But maybe, like the choir, you're only living a half-life with one another. Maybe you're a singer without a song, with tired lungs and a weary throat, without trust in those around you, or hope in yourself, or true direction to look up to.

The movie disturbs us. If we're going to allow ourselves to become such a choir, to be galvanized, transformed, harmonized and converted, we're going to face others' scorn, envy, and violence, we're going to have to confront our fears and our enemies, we're going to be launched on a journey whose final destination we don't know and can't control. If we say no to the siren call of the choir, the film gives us two options: we can try to suppress it by machination and manipulation, like the pastor, or we can try to destroy it by aggression and intimidation, like the abusive husband. In one of the movie's defining moments, the furious Conny comes to reclaim his terrified wife from a rehearsal and stop her getting on the bus to Austria, only to find the choir closes around and enfolds her, leaving him powerless and speechless. The dry bones have found their muscle.

But before we're too quick to condemn the husband and the pastor, let's recognize that what they're saying is, "Leave those dry bones right where they are." This is a life-or-death struggle, fought from the gut. Joining this choir is a decision made at the core of our being, and it's bound to shake each of us in ways that make our bones chatter and shiver and rattle. Every member of the choir faces three questions. (1) Am I prepared, at this weary, tired, and worn-out moment in my life, to discover a new way of singing, to learn a new song, to let this conductor into my heart, to let music into the depths of my being? (2) Am I prepared to relearn the disciplines of working together, to face and name the limitations and rejections and profound anger I see in the other choristers, and that they see in me, to participate in making something beautiful not according to the textbook but out of the ugly dry bones that lie in my valley and theirs? And (3) Am I prepared to face the embarrassment, hostility, failure, frustration, and anxiety all of this is going to provoke?

In John chapter 11 when Jesus gets the news that Lazarus is dead, he says, "Let's go to Judea again." The disciples say, "But Judea's full of people who want to kill you." Let's call them Romans and religious leaders – let's call them Conny the husband and Stig the pastor. Thomas is the only one who realizes what Jesus is really saying to the disciples. Thomas knows that the disciples have to ask themselves the same questions in the face of Jesus that the choristers have to ask themselves in the face of Daniel, their conductor. Can I learn a new song? Can I face the truth about myself and my companions? Can I face the hostility this is going to provoke in others? Thomas knows his answer. He declares, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

And quickly we realize that the story of Daniel and the choir is the story of Jesus and the disciples. The conductor harmonizes a motley crowd of fragile failures into something beautiful and courageous and inspiring. So does Jesus. He faces conflict and opposition, but brings forgiveness and healing. So does Jesus. At Innsbruck Daniel goes back to the concert auditorium, the place of danger he knows so well and fears so deeply because it gave him a heart attack last time he was there. Innsbruck is Daniel's Jerusalem. The members of the choir have no idea what going to Innsbruck really represents for him. But Daniel goes to Innsbruck and gladly lays down his life so the dry bones of the choir may be infused with the glorious new music of the Spirit. It's the story of Jesus translated into Swedish.

And at this point everything fuses into one picture. We've witnessed that the story of Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones is the story of the Old Testament, because it's about whether God can make the dead Israel live again. We've discovered that the Swedish story of Daniel and the choir is the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones, because it's about how dry bones, through the music of the Spirit, come slowly, clumsily, but ultimately thrillingly to life. We've realized that the story of the Swedish choir is the story of Jesus and the disciples, because they're both about the conductor so loving the choir that he goes to the place of greatest danger and lays down his life to let loose the Spirit of new music and new joy that transfigures not just them but the whole world. Now, finally, we can see what all this means is that the story of Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones is the story not just of the Old Testament but also of the New, because Jesus is the one who finally enters the valley, and prophesies to our bodies and our spirits with his body and his Spirit, and makes these bones shake and rattle and roll. And this same question, the question at the heart of the Old Testament and the New Testament, is the question facing us today more than any other.

Look at your life. Look at this valley of dry bones. Feel the hand of the Lord come upon you. Hear the Spirit of the Lord whisper in your ear, this very moment. Listen to this question the Lord is asking you. "Beloved child, can these dry bones live?" Recognize in yourself the violent Conny and the manipulative Stig that make you shrug your shoulders and say, "I dunno. Don't ask *me*." Look down again. Are you looking at a valley of dry bones? Have you been dragging this sack of dry bones through the valley for longer than you can remember? Why pretend any longer?

Ask yourself the three questions:

Am I truly willing to learn new music?

Am I willing to be let the Spirit make music out of my dry fragile flesh?

Am I willing to face scorn and shame as I start to sing this new song?

Just as the Lord whispered to Ezekiel, he's whispering to you: "I am going to open your grave, and bring you up from your grave. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

Maybe it's time to join that choir.