

Year A Lent 5 – 9/3/08

Ezekiel Echo Mime

A long time ago the Israelites were captured. (Put hands together as bound)

They were taken away from their land. (Walk across room with hands bound)

The Israelites were very sad. (Sad face)

The Israelites thought there was no hope. (Head down and shaken)

But God spoke to Ezekiel. (Brighter face, hands lifted)

God showed Ezekiel a vision. (Hands to face like glasses)

Ezekiel saw dry bones in a desert. (Point to data projector image)

God told Ezekiel to tell the bones there is hope. (Tell bones)

God put muscles. (Flex biceps)

God put skin. (Run hands over face)

God put breath. (Puff out before “breath”)

Into the bones and they came to life. (Star jump at end)

God said the Israelites were like the bones.

God said he would put life (Star jump) back into them.

God said he would lead them back home. (Walk across room)

God said they would be happy again. (Cheering)

Hampton Park Sermon

This passage in Ezekiel is about God’s message of hope to his chosen people the Israelites. In the darkness of despair, when everything seemed lost during their exile in Babylon, God asks Ezekiel to give the Israelites the message that God is with them, and will lead them back to their home.

This is a message that today we apply to the church. Even if it seems as though things are dire, Ezekiel tells us that with God there is always hope.

I preached on this reading three years ago when it came up in the lectionary and gave a message very similar to the one I have just told you. I applied it to our church here and said that because God is with us there was hope for our future.

After the sermon, Ken Reedy, and I have got Ken's permission to say this. Ken said, "Matty, my son. Good sermon, but let me tell you something. Matty, this church died 10 years ago and it will take more than one of your sermons to convince me otherwise." Ken was suggesting the church was in the valley of the dry bones and had been there for quite some time.

Since then, with God, we have done some great things, including creating a completely new "emerging church" faith community – Sharing the Journey – that now has 30 people along to it consistently. Much of our renewed life has come from embracing the ideas of the emerging church and mission-shaped church.

As well the building committee has been toiling away over those 3 years and now has the building to the stage where works should commence early next month.

Things are looking really positive – just to prove the point that with God there is always hope. Maybe the time wasn't right before.

The building plans back in 2001 that didn't go ahead were for a building just like this one, only with a hall. A church and a hall built in a different location wouldn't really have assisted us to be what the church is called to be – an agent of God's mission for the local community.

The proposal that was put to Presbytery for the then building project on December 4, 2001 stressed the need for the new church building on the basis that the church needed to be in a highly visible presence. It seems to me the assumption was that if the church is in a more visible location more people will come along to Sunday morning worship. I don't believe we can rely on this to be the case - we can't think that a new building will do the work for us.

It comes down to the question of what the church is and what a church should do? I would suggest that the church is the community of followers of

Jesus. As a response the church should take up the mission of God, just as Jesus did – to care for the sick, the lonely and lost.

The new building is not going to do that for us. *The new building is a technology, an implement that can help us to do mission*, nothing more, nothing less. We cannot fall into the trap of thinking that the new building will be our salvation.

Our new building will act as the venue for Sunday morning worship services, a venue for “Sharing the Journey”, a venue for Connections to operate their programs, a venue for playgroup and a venue for the minister’s office. These are all things we are presently doing. I suggest that to fully utilize this technology, this implement, we must pray and discern what God is calling us to. We must discern how we can use this facility as a venue for local people to gather and experience what community can be and through doing so experience the love and acceptance of God.

This is a moment in time when we can rethink church. If we simply move how we do church at the moment up to a new location we miss what God is calling us to – mission. The building has been designed to look house-like, so that it is not institutional and is welcoming to those who may not consider themselves “church-people”. The building has been designed with mission and outreach in mind, reflecting what we are called to. It has a large kitchen in the middle of the building accessible from many rooms reflecting the centrality of hospitality. We need to utilize it in this way.

I think it is precisely the ideas of mission shaping the church and the ideas of the emerging church which have enabled us to respond to the call of God best, these past few years. And I believe we need to firmly embrace these gospel visions and values in the transition to the new building. Traditional church (like our Sunday morning service) has the mission assumption that people need to come to us as we are. The assumption is that people need to take the step to come to us.

Emerging church, like “Sharing the Journey” is about meeting as the followers of Jesus in a culturally authentic way. It is about meeting as the followers of Jesus or yet-to-be followers in a way that engages and makes sense to that group of people.

Some of you may be thinking this is all good and well but emerging church is only for the younger people. Let me read you part of an article about emerging church:-

“The Friendship Group for older people at St Alkmund’s Derby, England has grown steadily over ten years. It now has 70 to 80 members. It meets every Tuesday in a church room for a two-course lunch, followed by a variety of activities one week and worship the next, on an alternating basis. A fortnightly Thursday group, with a dozen or so members meets for Bible Study. What makes this an example of emerging church is that the great majority of the Friendship Group do not attend Sunday church: what happens on Tuesday (and Thursday) is their church. The one-week annual holiday involving around 30 members is a highlight.”
Emergingchurch.intro p. 26

Given that Hampton Heath is across the road, given that these days it is seldom people gather around a piano to sing tunes they grew up with, and given that many people really love to do this, maybe there is an emerging church community of this nature God is calling us to in the new facility. Just a thought, because the possibilities are endless.

However, I raise this possibility intentionally, because none of us are too old to offer our talents for the benefit of the gospel. Maybe in giving ourselves to the Spirit, God can breathe life into our bones.

Whatever new initiatives we take up, whatever new ways of being church we develop, we need to be thinking, praying and dreaming about them now. We need to begin discerning these things now as the shift to a new facility gives us the opportunity to begin again, anew.

For the sake of the gospel and the glory of God.

Sermon – Narre Warren North

Friday we talked about some of the old things...

Bob has told me about some times in this church when it was Bob, someone else and the preacher – it must have seemed like the valley of the dry bones.

This passage in Ezekiel is about God’s message of hope to his chosen people the Israelites. In the darkness of despair, when everything seemed lost during their exile in Babylon, God asks Ezekiel to give the Israelites the message that God is with them, and will lead them back to their home.

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I am doing a course on the emerging church partly for inspiration and I came across this example in an article I read:-

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Emerging church intro p. 26

Of course this reminded me greatly about the Friendship Group at Narre Nth. This outreach began about 20 years ago by Andy and Irene Tannerhill. It was for people looking for company who enjoyed fellowship over a cup of tea. As Bob says they, “picked up a few people along the way.” Bob was the mainstay of this group for about the last 15 years I think, although it is hard to get too much out of Bob because he is so modest. Sometimes they had bible reading and devotion. It was a community of Christian hospitality and a wonderful outreach and in many ways similar to Uniting Socially. Although, the Friendship Group has been meeting a need, Bob can’t collect all the people he used to pick up and it has been put into recess.

We acknowledge Bob and Gordon and all those who have been involved during the years with the wonderful outreach that the Friendship Group has been for the people who enjoyed the community over a cuppa. We thank Bob and Gordon and all those involved for their example of Christian discipleship in thinking beyond themselves and reaching out to others in the community.

Given that there have been recent times with few people involved at Narre Nth, (Mark has also told me of a church with 4 or 5 people) our times now may seem more like God's promise to be with us rather than the dry bones. Certainly, after the "Freedom Singers" last week there is a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement. Things do seem to be going well.

Things seem to be moving along well for Hampton Park as well, with the building project possibly beginning early next month. As a result of this church council has decided to move the monthly car boot sale from Hampton Park up to Narre Nth. This will mean more local people coming into the building and grounds here. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to think about how best we can do this best at Narre Nth and also how this fits into the mission we have of reaching out and offering hospitality to the local community.

The present stall-holders at Hampton Park will be given the opportunity to book their April stall at Narre Nth. Therefore we don't have a great deal of time to plan everything. If you would like to be involved in some way please speak with Rosemary, and if you don't you will probably be asked anyway.

The car-boot sale presents a great opportunity for Narre Nth to forge greater contacts with our local community. May God be with us in this as we seek to show the love and acceptance of God to this broken and hurting world.