

## No bones!

*Joseph's bones are carried from Egypt to Shechem. The tomb of Jesus is empty, as Jesus offers life through the resurrection and frees us from loyalty to place or nation. The Dean preaches on Genesis 50:4-26 at Evensong on 3 August.*

Are there certain words or phrases that immediately trigger a song in your head?

Can you hear “we built this city...” Without singing the phrase “on rock and roll”

I rarely hear the word “bones” without hearing “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones” and seeing the scene in the Singing Detective when the entire medical ward launches into a song and dance routine around Michael Gambon’s bed.

I have an unusual relationship with bones, or at least with one particular set of bones, as I held a position at Leicester Cathedral during the time when the bones of Richard III were discovered, analysed and then reburied in the Cathedral.

I never saw them. Very few people did. After the archaeologists recovered them, only those who had a direct responsibility for research or the burial had contact with them.

At the end of the period of scientific research, which showed conclusively that the bones were those of the last Plantagenet king of England, every bone was gathered up, laid on a bed of sheep’s wool, encased in a lead lined, oak coffin, and placed in a vault under a ton and a half of Swaledale fossil limestone. The expectation is that the bones will remain undisturbed for the next four hundred years as they had been for the previous four hundred years.

It mattered to people how the bones were treated and where they were laid to rest. Their final resting place in Leicester Cathedral said something about Richard III, about his kingship, his death and his restoration to dignity.

Perhaps you have thought about your final resting place and chosen a place for your burial or the scattering of the ashes of your bones.

God’s people were for many centuries a nomadic people. But when God made his covenant promise to Abraham, God promised two things, firstly that Abraham would be the Father of many nations, and secondly that the people would have a land of their own, Canaan, the promised land.

That land would only become the land of Israel after many centuries of conquest and warfare, but God’s people held on to the hope and certainty that it was God’s purpose that this was the land they should inhabit.

All this was a long way in the future while God’s people were exiled in Egypt and enslaved there.

After the famine, it seems that Joseph and his brothers lived in Egypt for a further 70 years, in uneventful stability and peace.

But Joseph remembered God’s promise, that God’s people would return to the land of their birth, that is Canaan, the promised land. And that is where he wanted his final resting place to be. So, he made his family promise that they would look after his bones and take them “home” when the time came.

Sure enough, when God set God’s people free, Moses carried with him the bones of Joseph, and some forty years later, when the people finally settled in the land that they had been promised, Joseph’s bones were finally buried in Shechem.

Poignantly, today Shechem is located in the occupied Palestinian territories on the West Bank of the Jordan, just east of Nablus. Today its population is predominantly Muslim, although there are two Christian churches in the city, one of which is closely associated with the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Sitting beside the well, Jesus offered the woman living water, bubbling up to bring eternal life.

Jesus and the unnamed woman have a conversation about whether it matters whether God's people worship on Mount Sinai, Mount Gerazim or Mount Zion. Jesus tells here that what matters is that God's people worship in Spirit and Truth. It is not the place which identifies them as the people of God, it is their faithfulness.

Jesus makes a promise that is radically different to that offered to Abraham and the people of the Old Covenant. It is not a promise of land, or security, or stability, it is a promise of life!

We give places emotional significance, I realised when I was preparing this sermon that I have visited the church in Nablus which is supposedly located on the site of the well. Places evoke stories, connection and meaning over time.

But, as the war in Israel / Palestine demonstrates painfully, conflict over land, over those places that are heavy with meaning. leads not to life but to death. To more bodies, more bones, more suffering.

Joseph has a tomb in a village on the outskirts of Nablus.

Jesus also has a tomb, deep in the heart of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. But there are no bones!

No bones! Bones of Joseph, and bones of Jacob, and bones of Mohammed, but no bones of Jesus!

No bones, just empty tomb, and to be clear, despite the long association of the burial of Jesus with the church of the Holy Sepulchre, we don't really know even where the empty tomb was.

No bones, instead we have the resurrection, the assurance that Jesus is risen from the grave, and now he lives at the right hand of God the Father praying for all his people.

It is the living Jesus Christ who meets with us by his Spirit and the same living Christ who is our Mediator with God, our Saviour, the source of life.

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What a powerful difference it would make if we were less fixated on where our bones might lie, on the land, on place as a marker of identity.

Dare we shift our focus to the living God who brings life and not death to God's people.

As we pray this afternoon, let us pray for deliverance from the idolatry of the land, from the dangers of nationalism without generosity and hospitality, and from the destruction of the land by exploitation, pollution and warfare.

Let us pray

That land might be treated with care and respect, nurtured and protected.

God our Creator, strengthen our determination to care for the earth, for soil and water, plants and animals, as your gift and our responsibility. May our love for particular places encourage us to treat all places as holy and precious in your sight.

Jesus, our Saviour, you walked on the hills of Galilee and knew the stones of Jerusalem. Look in mercy on the suffering of those who live in the Holy Land today. We pray especially for the people of Gaza and the West Bank, remembering the Catholic Church of the Holy Family in Gaza and their priest Fr Gabriel Romanelli, and the Episcopal church of St Philip in Nablus and their priest Fr Jamil Khader.

Spirit of God, you bring light and life through your church. Help us to hold lightly to the things that we value, so that we are freed from the temptations of idolatry, selfishness and greed. May our hearts be fixed on the things that give life, hope and joy.

And so we gather up these and all the prayers offered in this Cathedral today in the words of the grace....