

FROM BONES TO FLESH: THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" begins Charles Dickens classic work, *A Tale of Two Cities*. While set in the French Revolution (1789-1794) and its attempt to destroy Christian civilization, these sentiments were probably experienced a considerable time before.

It's 595 BC and a man sits alongside the Chebar River (located in present day Syria and Iraq) listening to a song, which would become Psalm 137: *"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,*

when we remembered Sion. We hung our lyres upon the willows in its midst. For there they who carried us away captive asked us for a song; and they who spoiled us asked us for mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy."

The man is the priest/prophet Ezekiel, a rarity in Israel: he is both a Levitical priest and a prophet. His name means "God strengthens" and was born into the priestly tribe of Levi (Remember that all Jewish priests had to be sons of the tribe of Levi). He listens to this Psalm/song while in exile in Babylon and all seems lost; Jerusalem has been destroyed along with the Temple of Jerusalem, the one place on earth where God's Real Presence existed; many of its sacred vessels have been taken to Babylon and the Ark of the Covenant has disappeared (Note: most probably the Ark was not destroyed but hidden before the Temple's destruction. The Babylonians would have taken this to Babylon as a trophy

instead of destroying it because it would have been proof of their ultimate triumph: our Babylonian gods defeated the Jewish God. Tradition has it that the prophet Jeremiah hid it and since he was subsequently taken into Egypt and died there, it's location has never been found (rest assured that Indiana Jones did not find it).



The Babylonian Captivity: Jews in Exile.

The bulk of the Jewish population has been deported to Babylon while a small number of dirt poor farmers have been left behind as vine-dressers (to

grow grapes for the conquerors). The glory days of Kings David and Solomon are but faint memories. They probably thought: **"It's finished!"** They have been deported to a foreign land with no prospects of returning home. They had no way of knowing that 70 years later Cyrus the Persian would defeat the Babylonians and permit the Jewish people to return home. Most importantly, all their religious institutions and structures have been destroyed. With the temple destroyed, sacrifices have ceased, the priests can't function. The synagogue has not yet developed so there is no place to go to worship God and pray.

Imagine a situation where you could not attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, receive Holy Communion nor any of the Sacraments of the Church. No churches, oratories, chapels or shrines to go to: **nothing**. This was the experience of the Exile for the Chosen People, yet they kept the faith. The 70-year exile would purify them particularly of their most heinous sins: child sacrifice, sexual immorality, and religious syncretism and indifference (i.e. There's no one true faith: one religion is just

as good as another) and mold them into the holy **Remnant** which would return to the Holy Land and from which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would come. How did they accomplish that? Here's where the prophet Ezekiel can assist us.

Like Ezekiel we are in exile. Firstly, because this earth isn't our true home. Secondly, the "world" represents a spirit that is anti-God and anti-Christ. Much of this has been gone over in previous newsletters but suffice today to say that to be a believing, orthodox (right belief) Christian who lives his or her faith is to be in effect in exile both in the Western post-Christian world and in the Church itself; looming persecution from the State (what's being touted as a "**Progressive**" understanding of Religious Freedom — which many Catholics are voting for and supporting) and the push by many in the Church (including some highly placed prelates) for the Church to "*evolve with the 'evolving' world.*" Like the exiles of Ezekiel's time we're tempted to discouragement and despair and to say: "It's finished." That's the message of our ruling elites which they cackle like a proud rooster. Many past figures said the same thing: the Church is still here. Ezekiel is a message of hope.

Ezekiel spoke to the people expressly of hope, of a future return to the promised land, and of reconciliation with God. Like every true prophet of God, Ezekiel said two things, the bad news and the good news, sin and salvation. Whenever you hear either half of the message without the other, you know the messenger is not a true prophet. This is especially true for today.

It's important to remember why the Chosen People went into exile in the first place. The "sin" part of Ezekiel's message is both awful and awful. Like all the prophets, he knows God as more than a comfortable chum. God is holy, just and unchangeable (contrary to a prominent prelate much in the news lately, God doesn't evolve); He cannot endure sin or compromise with it. Sin and God are like darkness and light, they cannot coexist. Therefore, Ezekiel describes the visible cloud of God's glory, the Shekinah (i.e. His Real Presence), leaving the Temple, where it had been present since Solomon

built it, and disappearing into the east, **because the people's sins had driven it away.** If the Church is pressed on all sides today it is perhaps because we have driven the Holy Spirit away by our sinfulness.

For a book of the Old Testament, the content of Ezekiel's message is quite advanced and sophisticated. He announces more clearly than any prophet before him the principle that each individual is responsible for and is justly punished for his or her own sins, not those of parents, ancestors, or the community. It can be argued that we are regressing to a pre-Ezekiel stage of moral wisdom in emphasizing the sinfulness of social structures more than the sins of individuals today.

It needs to be stressed that Almighty God was quite ornery about His Chosen People remaining separate from the peoples' surrounding them. They were **NOT** to be like them (sexual indulgence, child murder, greed). They were to be a **HOLY** people. As Ezekiel's people were in literal exile, God's people today will have to go into a modern-day form of exile to be purified into becoming the holy **REMNANT** which will welcome our Lord at His Second Coming on that day known to Him alone.

Now let's jump from 595 BC to 2016 AD and hear a similar message from a truly faithful prelate of the Church: Archbishop Charles Chaput O.F.M. CAP of Philadelphia. In an article for Crisis magazine entitled "*Time for Christians to Unplug from Our Secular Culture,*" he touches on this theme by citing the example of seeing Muslim women in their dress walking the streets of Philadelphia:

"In Philadelphia I'm struck by how many women I now see on the street wearing the 'hijab' or even the 'burqa.' Some of my friends are annoyed by that kind of 'in your face' Islam. But I understand it. The hijab and the burqa say two important things in a morally confused culture: 'I'm not sexually available;' and 'I belong to a community different and separate from you and your obsessions'...We need to help Catholics recover their own sense of distinction from the surrounding secular meltdown."

Like all prophets, Ezekiel's "bottom line" is not doom but hope: hope for salvation, for new life, for a resurrection. The basis of this hope is not the

human mind and wishful thinking, but the mind of God and divine revelation. The most memorable of the prophetic promises in Ezekiel is chapter 37, the famous vision of the dry bones coming to life. This prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost. It continues to be fulfilled as Pentecost occurs in the lives of individuals, in the life of the Church, and potentially even in the whole world. Our world's slide down toward darkness can be reversed, the dead can live, the wind of the Spirit still blows from the four corners of the earth.

Our mission is clear: we have to become that holy remnant that Israel became during its exile. God always brings good out of apparent evil and these times will be no different. Ezekiel did not live to return to the Promised Land. He suffered exile even though he had been faithful throughout. Most probably, that will be the experience for many of us,

but remember, in the Christian order suffering is **redemptive**.

An ending note: On July 17, 1794, 16 Carmelite sisters were guillotined in Paris by the Masonic revolutionary government of France. In preparing her sisters for martyrdom the Mother Superior had all of them offer their deaths as an expiation for the sins and horrors of the Revolution. 10 days later, July 27, 1794, Maximilian Robespierre — architect of the Reign of Terror — was overthrown and the terror ceased. You could imagine the holy angels welcoming and escorting these sisters into heaven.

We will probably have to make a similar sacrifice. Maybe not shedding our blood (at least not in the beginning) but a martyrdom none-the-less. Let us make it expiatory for the sinfulness which engulfs the world and take hope in the message of the prophet Ezekiel: The bones will come to life. ✠