

Occasionally, when I'm researching for a sermon, I come across someone I really wish I had known. This week it was Amos Wilder. He was a first class tennis player, became a distinguished New Testament scholar and poet, but in 1915, at the age of 20 and half way through his college degree, he volunteered to serve as an ambulance driver with the American Field Service during World War I.

Perhaps he might have met my grandfather – he was a stretcher bearer during World War 1. However after two years Wilder became a corporal in the Army's 17th Field Artillery of the 2nd Division.

Wilder's journals and letters home (including correspondence with his brother, Thornton Wilder who became a well-known writer) led after the war to a book about his experiences.

As an ambulance driver, Wilder travelled widely from the Western front in Belgium and France to the mountains of Macedonia. His reflections on the people and events provided one of the few wartime memoirs from the common soldier's point of view.

Wilder's journals don't dwell on the dreadful scenes of death and carnage in the trenches but instead focused on the activities and people behind the lines. He didn't avoid the harsh realities of conflict but tried to look beyond them as well.

In one of Wilder's poems there are three lines which I discover have often been quoted when people have preached about today's passage from Ezekiel. The people is called "A hard death" and the lines are

"Accept no mitigation,
But be instructed at the null point.
The zero breeds new algebras."

These are words of encouragement from a man who'd seen in battle the worst that people could inflict on another, the null point; however the depths were a time to learn from. Be inspired when all seems lost and worthless.

The comment about zero breeding new algebras is a reminder that algebra, a word which comes Arabic, only flowered after Indian mathematicians invented the zero and Persian scientists expanded it into the decimal system in the 9th century.

Zero meant literally nothing, but it inspired the imagination and grew into a great scientific field.

It came to Europe some two hundred years later, not always seen as a happy arrival for the school children of the following generations.

When everything is lost how can there be something? That's not just a question for mathematicians - the battlefield scene of dry bones that confronted Ezekiel was surely a hopeless one.

The vision of the valley of dry bones is certainly the best known passage in the book of Ezekiel and one of the most stirring in the whole of the Old Testament.

The ministry of the prophet Ezekiel took place in Babylonia – present day Iraq – when the people had been taken off into exile after Jerusalem had been defeated.

It's a vision of course – Ezekiel is dreaming about his people and wondering if finally they had been abandoned by God. Was faith possible, was there to be a future, at the null point?

Some of the exiles will have tried to keep their hopes up. The people taken into exile were the upper classes, used to being in power, and they hoped one day to be restored to their power.

Ezekiel didn't encourage that hope –the rulers had deserved to be beaten and swept away. They had lived and ruled badly, and he told them that. Ezekiel was probably not everyone's favourite preacher in Babylon.

So how does the vision of the dry bones being filled with breath and so coming to life come in? Well, the bones in the vision are the house of Israel. Defeated and left to decay on the battlefield. The people in exile lamented that their life was worthless, the body lacked the vital spark of life, and there was no future.

Ezekiel however declared a vision of the bones being filled with 'breath', the breath or life of God. Until God filled the bones with breath, the flesh, skin and bones of Israel are nothing. But when the breath was given then new life couldn't be denied.

The longest minute of my life was the time between the birth of my older daughter Sarah and the first cry she uttered. It's a sound every parent longs to hear. From nothing – to breath and life.

Don't ever be angry at a child crying. It can be disturbing when we don't know why the child is crying, and infuriating when we are trying to concentrate, but that cry is always life.

One of the joyful features of the Old Testament is the hope that fills it, and the Spirit or breath of God. Some people focus on the judgements and the laws – but the whole of it is shaped by the faith that God will overlook the constant impatience and misuse of wealth and power, and that he will inspire his people. The message page after page is 'you are my people, rejoice and behave like it.'

I know it's not politically correct and inconvenient to introduce sin and responsibility into the conversation, but it's allowed in a sermon. The fact is that we together are responsible for the shape the world is in. Society, national and international, reflects the values of those who participate in it.

When we consider the societies we live in, and the way that power is used by those who exercise it, would any of us dare say that it's all good and wonderful? Clearly not.

But I am not downcast. We, who know the power of God, know that the miracle of hope is offered to us. The prophets of old refused to be silenced, as did Jesus and those who later preached in his name.

They insisted, as I will today, that our hope not some otherworldly future hope, but is hope in God the creator, in Jesus who lived and died for us, and the Spirit who is the life of the world. And our hope is for life in the real world, demanding we deal with real situations and real power.

There was nothing obvious that led from the round zero, representing literally nothing, to the elegance and wonders of modern mathematics.

It is also not immediately obvious when the hope and inspiration of an individual will change the world. But it can and does because, as many people have observed, individuals always change the world - for better and worse.

Our hope is in the real world, real hope I mean, not just a sitting waiting on God; a lively, risky, generous life which rejects the selfishness of the worldly.

We won't all have the impressive careers or insights of an Amos Wilder, and I certainly pray that fewer and fewer people will be subjected to the battlefield. But we will face challenges and setbacks. And at times we will all have to use vision and imagination and be coaxed forward to live again.

It feels sometimes like an experiment, as one theologian described the adventure of faith. But trusting God we are called to pursue that experiment with imagination, creativity, commitment and courage.

Each of the parents who presented their children for baptism today has begun the risky, and the costly, life of the mother and father.

I am sure they wait to see expectantly where hopes and plans for their children will lead them. Perhaps Charles and Nadia's daughter Babette will become a musician; she'll get plenty of encouragement from the family. Or Vincent and Chantik's son a scientist like his parents.

Today we committed ourselves in hope that we will share our vision of world of hope, hope and trust in God, with them. To nurture in them confidence and wonder, to teach them thanksgiving and generosity, to help them express joy and praise as express our joy and praise together.

I hope they'll discover a Godly imagination and enjoy being his creation, in a world of possibilities and challenges.

I said during the baptisms earlier that one of the important images in baptism is that of new life. Paul in Romans, not in today's passage but in chapter 6 suggests that baptism in Christ symbolises sharing his death and resurrection.

And in today's passage we read that being in Christ, one of Paul's favourite descriptions of life as a Christian, means sharing the resurrection life, a life with the Spirit, the breath of God in us.

We are God's creation, Paul never tired of reminding people of that, so live it – with hope, faith and vision.

One of the versions of Psalm 100 which we sang at the beginning of the service, the older version at hymn 63 contains the lines "Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice. Him serve with mirth..". I remember John Bell saying once that "if we sing those words about

singing cheerfully and with laughter, we need to remember to tell our faces. Worship doesn't always look very cheerful."

Amos Wilder experienced the worst of the First World War, but as a champion tennis player went with his partner to play at Wimbledon, and become Albert Schweitzer's secretary for a while.

After studies at Yale, Wilder became a minister, taught theology in Chicago and then finally at Harvard. He was involved in the world, and he didn't lose hope.

Henri Dunant, a businessman who saw the result of a battle between French and Austrian armies in 1859 at Solferino. On a visit to the French commander Napoleon he found a battlefield containing 38,000 dead and dying soldiers. And he was inspired to found the Red Cross to bring help to those affected by conflict.

Of course the Apostle Paul was another businessman, a tentmaker, whose experience of the risen Christ gave him a vision for faith and life which he taught wherever he went.

God cares about his world and the people in it, and asks us to do the same. So we celebrate that life in Christ is his blessing, and a life worth living and sharing.

Amen