

Breathe on me, breath of God

By Edwin Hatch

THERE'S an Old Testament passage which would send chills up the spine if it weren't forever associated with a comic song.

But go back to Ezekiel's original, and dem dry bones are anything but. In chapter 37 the prophet speaks of being set in a valley full of bones. God asks him, 'Son of Man, can these bones live?' A suitably cautious answer is met by a demonstration of God's power, as - and we cannot avoid the image of the hip-bone connected to the thigh-bone, and so on - the bones come together and are clothed with flesh.

The miracle is complete, however, when the breath of God enters them and they stand on their feet, as a vast army.

The story was undoubtedly in the mind of Edwin Hatch (1835-1889) when he wrote 'Breathe on me, breath of God'.

An Anglican priest, Hatch became professor of classics at Trinity College in Toronto and rector of a high school in Quebec before returning to academia in Oxford. He was a considerable scholar, but of all his works this hymn is the one to have survived.

The story in Ezekiel is about the parlous state of the people of Israel in exile. Their national glory is long gone, and they needed a promise of hope for the future. Though they were nothing but dry bones, God would restore them to life again.

The Church in England in the mid-19th century, for all its trials and doctrinal squabbles, was in a far healthier state than it had been fifty years before; the Evangelicals and the Oxford Movement between them had rescued it. So Hatch makes the Pentecost moment of the Spirit into something deeply personal. He cannot say that the nation needs a revival, but he knows enough of the human heart to know that every Christian does.

However, his vision is not of a quiet, inoffensive piety which consists of good works and soft words. It owes more to the great mystics like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. He imagines the Christian soul lost in God, transformed in this world into the likeness of Christ by the indwelling of the Spirit of God. We are rather used to the words, and sing them too easily. A prayer that God will bring us to the point where we love what he loves, will what he wills, 'until this earthly part of me/ Glows with thy fire divine' is not to be made lightly.

Breathe on me, breath of God is one of those hymns which should endure, and be sung, if only because it reminds us that all our social activism and evangelistic zeal will only flourish if they are rooted in personal devotion to Christ.

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