

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Delivered by **Atty. Jose Riodil D. Montebon**, University Legal Counsel

Ezekiel 37: 1-6; 10-14

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. And He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, Thou knowest."

Again, He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord' "...

So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and they stood on their feet, and exceedingly great army. Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut-off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, Behold I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it,' declares the Lord."

In the last few days, we've indulged in a great celebration. In our celebrations, we have treated ourselves to fond recollections of Mr. Jose A. Ravello. We have laughed together at the humorous vignettes recounted, shared tears over the expressions of helplessness and loss, and agreed with the tributes to his achievements as a war veteran, an Olympian, super-athlete, athletic administrator, civic leader, and faithful church member. We have admired his overflowing generosity of heart and spirit, and identified with the frailties of his humanity.

As I bring these recollections to mind, celebrating the life of Joe or Peping Ravello, Manong Joe to me, I ask myself what is the purpose for funerals and vigil services? What is its meaning especially for the living who held the departed one so dear and who will surely miss his physical presence?

As I ponder on this question, it dawns on me that, in a fellowship like this, we are meant to learn lessons from the rich life presence Manong Joe blessed us with; that we may face each day more confident, better prepared, more deeply aware of God's wonderful gifts for us. To come into the presence of the Lord with this assurance is a blessing, indeed! And in the case of Manong Joe's memory, whom we honor, a most fitting way to consummate our fellowship. For the man who dedicated his life to excellence, being the best: whether at work or at home, in life, allows us yet a final opportunity to learn valuable life lessons as we gather to remember, as President Ben Malayang refers to him, a giant among Sillimanians, Peping Ravello.

And we should take every opportunity to learn of Manong Joe's example. For in our present day preoccupations with material pursuits, we would do well to focus back

on the basic Christian values which Joe Ravello, a man of great generosity and faith espoused as a cause and lived as a lifestyle.

But Manong Joe was more than just an outstanding public personality who stood out as a giant among his peers. He was an equally dominant presence in this Church. Joe with the easy, sometimes sacrilegious laugh; he often disarmed you with his sense of humor whether the moment was tense or light. This was the giant's gift – he could put you at ease even in the most stressful of moments. He had a way of always taking everything in stride.

Charge this to his experience as a seasoned competitor, later as a wise and gifted coach, who stared down any pressure he faced “in the classroom, on the court, the track, the field”. Whatever it was, Joe Ravello was always a winner in life. And he kept on his winning ways even to the very end, because this giant among men unselfishly shared himself for the goal of making those around him even bigger winners. Just take a look at the long list of men and women who became winners simply by being around his compelling presence. It is said that Joe Ravello never grew old. He kept young by devoting himself to the production of winners – not just in contests and competitions, but especially winners in life! Take a look at his family; take a look at his children, and grandchildren. They stand as testimonies to Peping Ravello's legacy of the winner's life.

In a sense, he provided the compass which enabled everyone around him to get their bearings. He may have seemed a happy-go-lucky free spirit, but he was really a very loving, caring person. And for this, he will be painfully missed.

And so viewing before us this lifeless representation of the person we love, we wonder: *can these bones live?* Indeed, can one who is now dead still live among us?

Our text provides us with inspiration and hope. It is the time of the Babylonian captivity and the Israelites are discouraged and beaten. In this setting, Ezekiel is given a vision. “In ecstatic vision Ezekiel is transported to the valley where earlier he had seen the glory of Jehovah, and is made to pass up and down in it that he may see how full it is of dry bones—the bleaching bones of a slaughtered army. Jehovah asks, ‘Can these become living men again?’ [The] idea of resurrection had not yet dawned upon the vision of the Hebrews [at this time]... Jehovah bids him prophesy to the bones: he will cause spirit to enter into them, they shall be clothed with human bodies, and live.” (W. L. Wardle, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, p. 740). Ezekiel does what God tells him to do, and the result is a dramatic revival of the house of Israel. This vision became a source of inspiration and hope for the Hebrew exiles.

In our context, it speaks to us on two levels. In the first place, it is our reassurance of the promise of resurrection; of Christ's victory over death. Thus, we need not fret or fear over Manong Joe's state or circumstance. We know with certainty that he has been raised to life and that he is now at home with the Father. Just as Ezekiel's vision dramatically opened the eyes of the Hebrews to the reality of resurrection, thus did Jesus fulfill the prophecy from Scriptures.

And even more than our assurance of Manong Joe's well-being, we are likewise brought to an understanding of the reality of his living on among us. *Can these bones live?* By the grace of God and only through Jesus Christ, they certainly can!

For though his physical attributes and presence will soon leave us, his memory, yes, his legacy lives on! And even more than our memories of him, he will live in that part of each of our lives which has been forever influenced by his touch. If his children are generous, should we be surprised? If a grandchild is thoughtful and caring and considerate, is it totally unexpected? If a dear friend learns to encourage others, is it so

unusual? In the myriad ways Manong Joe affected each of us, in the special ways he inspired or even provoked us, he lives on. So look all around this room, look into the faces of his children, his friends, his colleagues: and you will see how very much alive Peping Ravello is! His presence overwhelms this very room! *Can these bones live?* They can and they are alive!

In a sense, by allowing him to live on in our memories, and his legacy to influence the daily conduct of our lives, Manong Joe becomes public property. For the good qualities and virtues with which he blessed people, must now be dispensed through us; that the channels of the blessings he initiated may continue to flow without ever reaching a terminal point. *Can these bones live?* They certainly can!

On the second level, the question is posed, not as much for Joe Ravello, as it is to us. For when we really reflect on the promise that God offers, on the invitation that Christ makes, we also need to confront ourselves with the question: When it is your turn, *can your bones live?*

Indeed, an upside to funerals and vigil services is that we are forced to confront our mortality. And when we do, we must wrestle with the issue of readiness.

You see, there is no avoiding this inevitable reality. And neither works nor tradition can make it go away. We cannot buy salvation, and cannot inherit it. It is personal, and it is willful.

To let our bones live, we need to make the definite and deliberate act of surrendering our lives to Christ. To let our bones live, we should be willing to die. For resurrection cannot come unless there is first death. And just like the seed which must first fall to ground and die before it can give new life, so, too must we die to ourselves. For death, in the context of salvation, is not merely a physical one. It entails a far greater sacrifice, dying to our self-interest, dying to our selfishness, dying to our self-centeredness. For to die to self is to place oneself completely in the hands of God.

For Manong Joe, we know that he had claimed the promise of salvation before he left us. He had an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ as his savior. And throughout life, he died to self for the sake of others. His was a faith that endures. His was a life of love overflowing. And now he has claimed the greatest victory. He has received his reward. He is at home in eternal peace and joy.

What about us? Have we apprehended Ezekiel's vision and appropriated the promise given by God?

"Thus says the Lord God, 'Behold I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it,' declares the Lord."

Sometimes, it takes great pain and suffering to realize that Christ is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life. Sometimes, a great and unexpected blessing opens our spiritual eyes. Sometimes, healing, as in my case, galvanizes our commitment. Still, sometimes, it's as simple as feeling his comforting presence in our grief. *Can these bones live? They can, if you let God! Amen.*