



Reading Ezekiel 36:16-38

Context

If we go back to using the sermon notes by Paul Langham for 6 March, this passage is set in the chapters of 33-39 with the prophecies of restoration - God wanting to restore His people to him, so that they will have an '*undivided heart*' as Janet Lee spoke in the talk of 19th March, so that they follow His ways, His decrees and His laws and giving up their worshipping of idols. In the opening part of chapter 36 Ezekiel prophecies for the return of the people of Israel to their home, for fruitfulness and for them to not suffer the taunt of nations. Ezekiel retells of how the people have, "*by their conduct and actions*" defiled God's name and He has "*dispersed them among nations*". Yet, because God wants the nations "*to know that he is the Lord*" He will gather, restore and cleanse them, put a new heart and a new spirit in them, make fruitful provision for them, resettle them into towns and make them "*as numerous as sheep*".

Introduction - "*Matters of the heart, matter to God*"

The matters of the hearts of each of you, the state of your heart, matters to God.

The matters of the heart of Christ Church, matters to God.

It matters so much that this is the second time in 3 months that the verses of Ezekiel 36:25-27 have been preached on in Christ Church. "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you, your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*" On January 16th Roberto, our Senior Pastor was led to preach on this and on the same day Jackie Langham, uncomfortable with back pain felt compelled to come to the gathering because God had given her the same words. These were God's words through his prophet Ezekiel to His people in Israel almost 2500 years ago. They are His words to us today.

Are we listening?
Are you really listening?

We can listen with our ears, acknowledge it with our heads and thoughts and go away unchanged.

We can listen with our ears, engage with our hearts and minds and let the Spirit move us so we go away opened and willing to change. It says in verse, "*I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*".

Question and reflection:

If God is repeating this message to us, what is He calling us to change in our hearts individually and together as a family?

Part One - I will - God restores

In the opening verses of today's passage we hear God revisiting the deeds of the Israelites -strong language of "*they defiled their land by their conduct and actions,*" (v16), "*they shed blood,*" (v18) "*they profaned my holy name*" (v20). Through their hearts of stone – the actions of the God's people have shown disrespect and irreverence for God and those who are not believers have witnessed this. Their actions 2500 years ago may be different in their culture and time but in so many ways could be the same as for us today.

Do we through our words, thoughts and actions reflect the love of God in our homes, families, relationships, work places, neighbours etc or do we disrespect his Holy Name – have hardened and unhealthy hearts in some areas of our lives.

When Roberto spoke in January he gave some wonderful examples to carry out a health check on our hearts. Let me repeat these:-

- o Are you nurturing roots of bitterness?
- o Is there an unresolved conflict/disagreement in your relationships – family, friends, colleagues?
- o When offended, do you respond with criticism, or harbour negative thoughts, ?
- o Do you have idols in your life – your role at work, your status in material goods,
- o Do you have a need to be busy distracting you from your focus on Jesus, time with Him in worship, prayer and reading His Word?
- o Are you, perhaps, refusing to acknowledge and follow Jesus in a calling that He has given you to serve Him?
- o Is there someone that you need to forgive?

Repentance and forgiveness are essential for breaking hearts of stone, even when we think we have hearts of flesh. Jesus calls us “*not to forgive seven times but seventy-seven times.*”

Question and reflection

Where might the Spirit be prompting you into repentance and forgiveness?

When you hear these examples, where might you have a heart of stone?

Part two - God reignites our hearts so it overflows

God wants softened hearts, because He wants, as he says in verse 23, “*then the nations will know that I am Lord; when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.*”

These personal changes of your heart go beyond just changing you – they overflow into all your relationships and all that you do. They overflow into our lives together as a family of believers at Christ Church. They overflow because our hearts are ignited with the love of Jesus.

How do we get hearts of flesh softened and so passionate about Jesus? It can be intentionally pursuing His presence during our personal times with Jesus and our times together as a family. It goes into the heart of our spiritual rhythms and disciplines which is spoken by Ezekiel in verse 27 “*I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*”



Jug/cup...saucer/plate - a metaphor for God pouring in and overflowing

Jug – represents all that God is and all that He longs to pour into our lives.

Cup – my life, my uniqueness and distinctiveness of who I am, who God created me to be and longs for me to be God longs to pour into my life until it overflows with his character and grace

Saucer – represents the relationships, the people that my life touches whether each day or more infrequently

Plate – represents the events, places, organisation where God’s gracious present in my life can overflow through me.

God pours into our cup

- come with who we are, in our personal times
- worshipping him, praising him,
- time in scripture,
- prayer for self, repentance, prayer for others,
- prayer for events and prayer for the world.
- Collective times of worship and prayer

The critical part of this is when we have Christ in us it overflows and from that overflow we go out – the church goes out. It OVERFLOWS into every part of our lives.

What would happen if we overflow – church out – into our parish. Earlier this year Janet gave us the statistic that of the about 8900 people who live in the parish, 44% say they are Christian. If my Maths is correct, that would mean our attendance on Sunday would be 3872 people if these are practising Christians. I don't see that number. It also means that we have about 5000 who do not know Jesus. If we overflow into our parish, what a harvest field!

Part three - God refocuses hearts so they are compassionate

God's compassionate heart in Ezekiel sees in verses 33-37 "*the desolate lands, the ruined and uninhabited towns.....from that compassion he will rebuild, resettle and cultivate them because He has heard their plea*"

In Matthew 14 verse 14 it says "*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed those who were ill.*" His heart was stirred with their needs. A softened heart is not self-centred but sees the needs of those around them.

Looking at the prophetic picture painted by Malcolm Bourne - The Great Commission - we see how God's heart is for the needs of His people. Those who are lost and lonely, homeless, suffering, disadvantaged and hurting. He responds with a compassionate heart to reach out to those in need.

Further questions and reflections

1. What is the reason that God will bring restoration for Israel?
2. From verse 23 to 36 God will - promises to - do several things to bring restoration? There is restoration for the people, for His provision and for the lands. What is He promising?
3. The central theme is around the heart and the spirit in verses 26-27. When you look at the questions raised by Roberto in January, how is the Spirit prompting you to respond to where you might have a heart of stone?
4. Relook at the picture of 'Jug/cup....saucer/plate which focuses on time spent with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit through worship, scripture, prayer for self, others, the world and the events in your life so that you overflow into relationships and events. What spiritual disciplines could be changed to ensure that you spend time pursuing the presence and overflowing into the people and places that God has placed you?
5. Where is your heart melting with compassion for the needs of people in your life, your community and Christ Church parish? What is the response for you and for your home group to these needs for others to know Jesus?