

Part 1: Ezekiel 36:24-28

I hope that you have not become too wearied with the book of Ezekiel. The chapters that we have read so far have been full of doom and gloom. Israel is being blamed by God, forced into exile and then also the temple is destroyed because the Israelites did not worship God in the temple.

For us today it may be difficult to understand the emotional impact that the destruction of the temple is to Israel. Not only is it the heart of religion and worship, it also symbolises the identity of the nations.

You may remember the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. This was a heavy blow to the identity of the USA as a nation. But the terrorists were also planning to destroy the White House. Can you imagine what this would have meant to the people of the USA. They would have been struck in their country's core identity. Image what it would mean for the people of Germany if the German Reichstag were destroyed, or for us, what would it mean for our country if the Houses of Parliament were destroyed. These

are not only buildings and places of government: they are part of the core of our various national identities.

This is what happened to the national psyche and identity of the people and the nation of Israel. This is why they were mourning so much. And it is at this stage that the prophecies of Ezekiel are changing. Now, even though warnings to change are still there, overtones of hope, promise and restoration are now forming the heart of the message of God to his people. God will restore Israel.

And at the heart of God's promise of the restoration of Israel is the promise of the Messiah and the promise of the Holy Spirit. But God makes clear that this is not for the sake of Israel, but for his own sake: Ezk 36:22-23 "...It is not for your sake, but for the sake of my holy name ... then the nations will know that I am Lord,..., when I show myself holy through you before their eyes."

How will God do this? We read that in the following verses, which David or Geraldine read. God will return the people to Israel, he will sprinkle them clean he will give a new heart and a new spirit in them, removing hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh. And after that the

people will follow God's law because of their nature. And then Israel will be God's people, and God will be their God.

We see here the promises fulfilled in the New Testament. Jesus comes as the Messiah, for those who believe in him he will wash clean (baptism, healing, restored, forgiven) and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out onto those who believe in Jesus, for empowerment and witness. With the result that people are transformed, their hearts of stone are removed, they have received new hearts, and because they are motivated they will want to follow God's law as a matter of course. That is the promise here to the people of Israel, in the lowest point of their history. And God extended this promise to the rest of the world too.

This is now also on offer for us. Jesus is the Messiah, and by believing in him he will redeem, restore, forgive and heal us. By receiving his Holy Spirit our hearts are changed and we want to follow him and his way of life (the law).

Let's pause for a moment here, before we read the next part.

Part 2: 37:1-14

It is a gruesome image, is it not? These shattered and very dry bones in the valley, all separate so that you cannot recognise one complete skeleton. And then on the prophecy of Ezekiel, we see these bones, form into skeletons, receive flesh and skin and stand up completely as whole people. But still something is missing. Then God's wind and breath comes and fills these dead bodies with life! Remember, that the Hebrew word for wind, breath and Spirit are the same: Ruach! God's Ruach comes into the bodies and they are alive again. The symbolism goes back to creation where God's Ruach was over the waters and God spoke creation into being. Here we see the recreation of the people of God.

But just go back to the image of dry bones. It is easy to say that this is a spiritual dryness. But now, having read the rest of Ezekiel, we may understand the mourning of the temple, the exile of its people and the sense of loss of a national identity. Now we may also understand that these bones describe quite accurately how the people of Israel were! This is not only spiritual. It is physical, mental, moral, it is the lack of identity, the lack of belonging, the coherence of a nation, and of their religion. These bones indicate a people brought down to nothing.

And it is after the people have lost everything, that they are now ready to receive from God. After they have lost their sense of nation, of pride, of who they can choose to worship, and their religious practices, it is only after losing all, that God can work the miracle. It is at this lowest point of crisis that God can break in.

It is not that he chooses it this way! He would have preferred that the people of Israel chose to remain the people of God. But they turned away and followed other Gods. In reality they turned away from him, and as a result of that they have lost their way...

Does that not have a parallel with our current western world? More and more the western nations are turning away from God. The laws of the land are changing so that they hardly bear a relation to God's morality or practice taught in the Bible. And it is even hard as Church not to be affected, as we live and breathe the same moral atmosphere. But the main issue is not the change in morality and religious practices ... that is the symptom of the core issue. The core issue is that people have turned away from God. Just like Israel in Ezekiel's time: they turned away from God and then they started doing evil.

Is this why there is economic and political uncertainty? Is this why there is a pandemic and people have to isolate themselves? Are we already at the stage of becoming the valley of dry bones as western nations? I really don't think so. We still have it too good. I fear that we have not gone far enough on our national journeys that we lost all our pride, will, drive, identity, independence and self-reliance.

But does it need to go that far? It is at the point of crisis, that we recognise who God is, and it is at the point of crisis that we will allow ourselves to be transformed so that we become God's people and God becomes our God. But let us pray that it will not need to get that far. Let us work hard so that as many as possible can change their own way and accept God as their God and Jesus as their Messiah.

It is the stubbornness of a people that had be brought down low for that stubbornness to be broken. Let's pray that our nation's stubbornness will be broken before we are the same as Israel in Exile.

In the mean time, let's look at ourselves. Where are we with God? Do we allow ourselves to be surrendered to God so that we can receive this heart of flesh and not a heart of stone? Do we trust God enough to let him fill us with his

Spirit? Or do we need to become a valley of dry bones ourselves? Learn from history, and do not let that happen to us. Repent, turn around, change your heart now, while God may still be found.

Let us ensure that we can say to God: “You are our God and we are our people”. Let us ensure that we ourselves are not at the centre of our lives, but that God is. This is what it means to repent. To recognise that it was wrong to live life without God in the centre and to ask for forgiveness for what we have done as a result of that. And once God is the centre of our lives, the Holy Spirit will convict us of sin and righteousness, and it will be easier for us to follow God’s laws and decrees.

And let us also work with God and his Holy Spirit to make Jesus known: so more and more people will say: “You are our God and we are our people”.

Amen.