

Rev John Faris Adelaide Road Church Sunday 26 June 2022

Reading:

Ezekiel 36.16-36

Again the word of the LORD came to me:

"Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions.

Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight.

So I poured out my wrath on them
because they had shed blood in the land
and because they had defiled it with their idols.

I dispersed them among the nations,
and they were scattered through the countries;

And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name,
for it was said of them,

'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.'

I had concern for my holy name,
which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things,
but for the sake of my holy name,
which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.

I will show the holiness of my great name,
which has been profaned among the nations,
the name you have profaned among them.

Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD,
when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

For I will take you out of the nations;
I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean;
I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

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.

And I will put my Spirit in you

and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

You will live in the land I gave your forefathers;
you will be my people, and I will be your God.

READER May this gospel continue to bear fruit and grow,
PEOPLE as we hear it and understand God's grace in all its truth.

Sermon:

The Christian conference speaker went into the hotel lift.
It had been a long day and now he was on his own and far from home.
Into the lift stepped an attractive young woman.
It was clear she was available to him for a price.

Tempting thoughts went through his mind.
"Why not?"
"No-one knows me here."
"I'd never be found out"

And then another thought rang clear"
A scripture verse given at his baptism

Romans 6.4

**"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that,
just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,
we too may live a new life.**

Remembering that verse
and remembering what his baptism meant -
cleansing and a new way of life
it was clear what he had to do, however enticing the temptation.
He went into his room, looked the door and spent the night, alone,
although God was close and pleased.

How powerful is scripture memorised to help us in a crisis!
How profound the meaning of baptism
to remind us that we do belong to Jesus Christ
and by his resurrection power we live to please him!

The people of God in Ezekiel's time were so messed up.
They disgraced the name of the God they said they followed.
They were polluted by all sorts of idolatry.
They had defiled the land God had given them.
So God had scattered them away from that land.
The 'holy name' of the LORD, his honour and reputation
were at stake.

Did the LORD declare
that he would wipe out faithless, idolatrous Israel and start again?
He could have done that but he didn't.

Nor did he say that their sin was no big deal
that he would love them whatever they did.

No, the LORD said he would
restore his people
clean them up and help them to live them in ways that pleased them.

God promised that he would
restore his people to the land, [24]
make them clean, [25]
give them a new heart and a new spirit, [26]
give them the Holy Spirit so that they can obey him [27]
and restore them to covenant relationship. [28]

v 24 the promise of restoration to their own land.
has never been completely fulfilled.
Some Jews were restored from exile
but the cleansing promised in v 25 was not fulfilled;
the giving of a new heart and a new spirit did not happen;
the Holy Spirit was not then put in their hearts to make them keep God's law.

From AD 70 the Jewish people were again banished from Jerusalem
and the rebuilt temple was destroyed.
After centuries of exile
in the 20th century Jewish people returned in numbers
to form the state of Israel.
but the cleansing promised in v 25 was not fulfilled;
the giving of a new heart and a new spirit did not happen;
the Holy Spirit was not then put in their hearts to make them keep God's law.

Does the modern state of Israel match those predictions?
Where is the cleansing, the new heart and the new spirit
and the giving of the Holy Spirit, the obedience of God's law
and the establishment of a new covenant?

We must avoid two mistakes.

One has been to deny the Jews any place in God's purpose,
which leads to the awful evils of anti-Semitism.

The opposite mistake is to say
that the modern state of Israel totally fulfils the promises of God
and should have the unqualified support of Christians.

The state of Israel is not more godly than any other state.
It is a very secular, God denying society.
The devout religious communities
who riot against people desecrating the Sabbath
are trying to keep God's law
but as they throw rocks
where is the new heart and the new spirit?

Ezekiel's prophecy is much more closely fulfilled
in the Messianic Jewish community:
Jews who confess Jesus as Messiah
while holding on to their Jewish customs and traditions.
They deserve our support and prayers
matching what Paul writes about the Jews in Romans cc 9 to 11:
the branches of the olive tree,
broken off in disobedience but now able to be grafted in again through faith.

These promises which are being fulfilled among believing Jews
can also be fulfilled for us non Jews.

God's ultimate purpose is to take all his people
washed from their sin, given a new heart and a new spirit
into a new "land" which is part of the "new heaven and a new earth"
promised in the closing chapters of Revelation.

The new Jerusalem will be a city
not just for the Jews but for all nations.

But to belong to that holy city in the close presence of God
we need to be holy people,
we need to be cleaned.

An old hymn based on Revelation 21.27 says

**"There is a city bright, closed are its gates to sin.
Nothing that is filthy, nothing that is filthy
can ever enter in."**

How then can we who are defiled, dirty ever hope to enter?
It goes on:

**"Saviour, I come to you, O Lamb of God I pray,
cleanse me and save me, cleanse me and save me,
wash all my sin away."**

v 25 is a verse I go back to
in my struggles with filthy idols which mess up my love for Jesus.

**"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean;
I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols"**

When I read those promises at the start of the service
I hope something in you just thrilled at the hope of this promise.

Notice that it is a promise not a command.
Of course we need to be clean,
of course we should not give in to idolatry
but God does not say with condemnation 'clean yourself up'.
He gives a promise, 'I will make you clean'.

In ourselves we have no clean water to change our lives
but God promises clean water and a complete cleansing
"from all your impurities and from all your idols".

Perhaps we may even say:
In our identifying with Christ
God has made us clean from all our impurities and all our idols.

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If you are conscious of some very bad thing you have done or said or thought
take to yourself this promise that God will cleanse you / has cleansed you
"from all your impurities and from all your idols".

And even more than that God promises in v 26 that we shall be
given a new heart and a new spirit
that he will remove from us our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh.
That's what he has done in giving us new birth in Christ.

Stones are lifeless, unresponsive, uncaring, unable to change;
flesh is living, active, able to change and respond to God.

God's promises are not just about cleaning us but also changing us inside
to make us able truly to love him and to love our neighbour.

God promises in 27 and 28 that we shall
receive the Holy Spirit to keep his laws and his covenant.
that we shall live in the land that he gives
and we shall be his people, and he our God.

We can link here
both back to the covenant promise with Abraham
and forward to the covenant fulfilled in Revelation 21
**"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.
They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."
(Revelation 21.3)**

The covenant was the solemn agreement between God and Abraham
that Abraham and his descendants would follow the Lord
and the Lord would give them the promised land to live in.

They would be God's people and he would be their God.

The Old Testament is the sad story
of their inability to be God's people
to keep their side of the covenant
faithless, fickle, idolatrous, unclean, disobedient.

In Ezekiel 36 the LORD promises a new covenant
for a people made clean
and given a new heart and a new spirit.

The challenge of this passage is
are we going to be **old covenant or new covenant Christians?**

Like God's people in the Old Testament
old covenant Christians
are sincere, try hard, but easily fall away.

Whereas new covenant Christians
trust God completely
and know despite sin remaining in us in this earthly life
that we are made clean
and we have been given a new life and a new power
to live to please God.

Baptism is the precious sign of the new covenant
to remind us of our cleansing and new life.

As he said:

"I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean"

A sign
of God washing us and God giving us new life.
God declaring that
God's people need to be holy people, close to God.

Lets not get sidetracked into debates about
what age you should be or how much water is needed.

Of course you need personal faith in Jesus for your baptism to be effective.
You cannot rely on the sign and reject the one the sign points to.
But we must understand that baptism is not so much a sign of our faith
but of God's amazing generous grace.

It's not about us feeling very faithful or very holy.
It's a reminder to us that God in Jesus
has cleaned us at the cross
and is giving us a new heart and a new spirit
so that we can resist temptation and live for him.

This applies not only to a temptation in a hotel lift.
but to all temptations:
to be grumpy at breakfast
or to vent road rage in a traffic jam
or to join in the office gossip
or throw a pity party for the way you've been treated

Whatever you struggle with.
you don't feel particularly faithful or holy do you?
Of course not.
But at the moment of temptation
remember that you have been sealed with the pledge and the guarantee
that Jesus is faithful and Jesus is holy
and that we are identified to die with him and live in him.

So be confident
that trusting Jesus personally
you are clean through his death and resurrection
and you can live more and more to please him

PRAYER

"Saviour I come to you, O Lamb of God I pray,
Cleanse me and save me, cleanse me and save me,
wash all my sin away."

LORD God of the Covenant
We thank you for the profound security
when we trust Jesus
that we are your people and you are our God.

Thank you for the promises
to make us clean to give a new heart and a new spirit
to put your spirit in us that we may obey you.
Thank you for the promise of a new heaven and new earth
without sin or sorrow or struggle
in your near presence.

May we consider our our baptism more often:
whenever and however it happened
it is a sign and a pledge from you
to keep us clean as we respond in faith.

No matter how strong the the temptation
and the weakness of our faith
give us confidence as Paul writes in Romans 6

that we have been buried with Christ through baptism into death
in order that,
just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,
we too may live a new life.

Therefore help us by your Spirit
that we may no longer be slaves to sin--

May we count ourselves dead to sin but alive to you in Christ Jesus.
not letting sin sin reign in our mortal bodies to obey its evil desires,
not offering the parts of our bodies to sin,
to become a slave of evil.
but rather offering ourselves to you,
as those who have been brought from death to life;
and offering the parts of our bodies to you as slaves who please God.

We praise you that
sin shall not be our master,
because we are not under law, in the old covenant
but under grace, in the new covenant.