

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 21 May 2023: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to another sofa sermon. There are always three readings to choose from for every Sunday. The New Testament reading we looked at on Thursday when we celebrated Ascension Day, and the gospel reading is part of Jesus' prayer to his Father. So, I'd like to look at the words from Ezekiel chapter thirty-six.

²⁴ For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land.

²⁵ "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

²⁸ "And you will live in Israel, the land I gave your ancestors long ago. You will be my people, and I will be your God.

The book of Ezekiel is attributed to the prophet of the same name. Prophets never have an easy life, since they speak out the truth of God which sometimes is not easy to hear. Jesus himself said that prophets are never welcome in their own home and was walking about himself as he said that. "You can't handle the truth", as the famous line from 'A Few Good Men' goes. But here the words of truth from Ezekiel are there to draw us in to listen to God. He tells us what God wants to offer us in relationship.

Firstly, he wants to make us clean by sprinkling clean water on us. Of course we can interpret this as the endorsement of baptism, the sacrament that represents the transition from spiritual death to life. It's God who sprinkles the water on us - not us, since only he can give us new life. As a result of that new life, our 'filth' will be washed away and we will no longer worship idols. God hates sin - he is not indifferent to the ways in which we live to serve only ourselves at times.

Sometimes I think we think he doesn't really bother but these words seem to indicate otherwise. And Idol worship - what is that? They are words from the ancient world, but they still have modern meaning. They're words which indicate an interruption of what God wants from us, which is to live in continual relationship with him. Idolatry is about something that has originally been God-given, but which we've warped and worshipped. Every day our minds, hearts,

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eyes, bellies and egos are distracted. And sometimes those distractions are more than a temptation and they draw us away from God. The worship he wants goes elsewhere. A wise old priest warned a younger priest against the desire for power, affirmation, money and perhaps surprisingly, nostalgia. Living in the past is often a skewed view of things. Think of the Israelites complaining about the desert and wishing they were back in Egypt when they could eat all they wanted. They carefully airbrushed out the fact that they were slaves. These things, and many others, and our personal temptations can all be permanent distractions, if we give into them, drawing us away from God.

God also tells us he wants to give us a new, tender responsive heart in the place of our stony heart. This is a sign of the new life he offers, and again, part of his generous, gracious love which we do not deserve. What does a tender, responsive heart look like? It's an engaged heart, which is not indifferent to the suffering around us. We cannot remain detached to what is going on around us, although of course that does not mean we think we are the answer to it. There has never been a time for the church to stand up and lament with those who are suffering like now, and speak out on behalf of those who have no voice: the destitute, the lonely, the poor, and the homeless. A tender, responsive heart is alert to the things happening outside church. We're not living in a holy huddle. We're aware of what's going on and asking God what we can do to help. That's why we're involved with our Foodbank (which incidentally is chronically low in supplies) at the moment, so if you are local and you'd like to give anything in some of the various locations around our parish. Church must be outward looking otherwise it will never have any purpose. I wonder if you, like me, were deeply touched by that photo of Rob Burrow being carried over the finishing line by his best friend Kevin Sinfield? What a powerful picture of a tender, responsive heart that was, and a real example to us all. On a local level, that also means we notice those in our own community who are struggling and support them too. We cannot be disengaged as members of the body of Christ. We carry each other's burdens, as the scripture says. That's why our coffee times after the services are an extension of our fellowship. They're an opportunity to meet but also talk about what's really going on in each other's lives.

This passage is part of our lectionary today, our set readings, since it points forward to the Holy Spirit which God has given us. This we will celebrate next Sunday at Pentecost, when we remember the fullness of the Spirit being received again by a local community and how it transformed them.

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Today's let's think about the truth of God and what he wants from us, and how he is longing for us to be in continual relationship with him, and how that might be expressed. Let's give thanks for his mercy which gives us new birth through the waters of life, and wipes away our wrongdoing. And let's ask for him to transform our cold and stony hearts, that we may love us he loved us. AMEN.