

VPBC 1 July 2018

The heart of the Matter. Becoming Human. An open heart instead of a heart of stone.

Ezekiel 11:16-20

Today we begin a short series within the overall themes of “Becoming Human” that we have been looking at throughout the year. We start with the “heart of the matter” with looking in the book of Ezekiel at some of the biblical approaches as to how to consider the human heart and what it tells us about God, God’s relationship to humanity and humanity’s relationship to God in becoming human. We think particularly of the verse ***Ezk 11:19 “I will give them a new heart and a new mind. I will take away their stubborn heart of stone and will give them an obedient heart. Then they will keep my laws and faithfully obey all my commands. They will be my people and I will be their God”***. We will draw the tension between what it means to be strong hearted, or open hearted. Hence the graphic. A heart of stone. Or the stone broken open to reveal a human red heart underneath.



This is not so much a medical appreciation of healthy hearts. It is not about replacing hearts by transplant or improving damaged hearts by bypasses or stents or healthy eating and exercise. It accepts the point, however, that without a beating heart you are likely to be stone cold dead. Yet the picture the bible uses here is that you can have a stone-cold heart but still be living and breathing and walking about. So, what is a stone-cold heart? A heart that is capable of inhumanity rather than becoming the humanity that God intended for us to realise and discover. Plus, if you are not on the transplant list, what exactly is a new heart? Not a refurbished or upgraded heart but a new heart? Why is it needed? Where does it come from? Who provides (even pays) for it, and why?

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel talk about a new heart. They were contemporaries of one another, although Jeremiah was a lot older and they were separated by 1,000 miles. Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem till its destruction and the aftermath, eventually ending up with a bunch of exiles in Egypt. Ezekiel lived and remained with the exiles taken to Babylon. They lived through desperate times, earth shattering events.

The heart is not just the beating organ but the seat of our emotions, understanding, ethics, where we hope, plan and dream. What we centre on. The heart of the matter, the essence. It mixes and relates to who we are in body, mind and spirit. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 in Matthew 13

“This people will listen and listen but not understand. They will look and look but not see, because their minds are dull, they have stopped up their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise their eyes would see, their ears would hear, their minds

would understand, and they would turn to me, says God, and I would heal them.” That’s the Good News version which mixes heart and mind, but other translations translate not mind but ‘heart’ so the NIV has *“hearts that have become calloused.”* (hardened)- so that they can’t see with their eyes, or hear with their ears and thus understand with their hearts. Our minds do not sum up who we are. We are not just what we think, our intellect, but also our hearts that contain the seat of our personhood and personality. It is not just ‘I think therefore I am’, but I know who I am because it is heartfelt and real. But both heart and mind are often open to the possibility of being changed. But is a change of mind, the same as a change of heart, or a change of heart a change of mind? Are there not elements of both? When that happens this often leads to a change of behaviour linked to attitudes and values that are embodied. Yet we too have an infinite capacity to fool ourselves. To misread the situation, to have a stony heart and stony heart thinking. So again, Jesus quotes Isaiah later on in Matthew 15:8-9 *“These people, says God, honour me with their words, but their heart is really far from me. It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach man -made rules as though they were my laws.”*

So, what is it to truly know, and understand the “heart of the matter?” We will not cover all this today, but we will make a start with this passage from Ezekiel. For most people the book of Ezekiel is a little dense. There are popular bits like the valley of dry bones (dem bones, dem bones dem dry bones) in Ezk 37 but there are many other complex visions and long chapters at the end on the new temple. So, to perhaps better understand the picture language and illustrations Ezekiel makes to get the message across we might consider his story. Jesus used stories. He himself – his life and ministry- is a story told for us. We need stories both to get our attention, but also to engage us. But it is by no means certain that these stories as they are told are understood or the implications of it connected correctly. Or that people will agree with the story, particularly if they feel threatened by the story or challenged by the story. Or even if they hear it and do understand it that they will do anything about it. So, although stories can be powerful, they are variously understood and received. [Here is an image of modern exile, stories of forced migration and vulnerability taken on the US Mexican border which has gone viral on the internet.](#)



How do you respond to this? If every picture is worth a thousand words, what does the story mean to you? What changes people's hearts and understandings of situations that can be variously explained and contested?

So, let us look at Ezekiel with his story and how he used his message to both explain and help people understand God's story, particularly when they had a different story running in their hearts and what they felt to be true, particularly stone heart thinking and understanding.

Ezekiel was born the year the book of the law was re-discovered in the temple under king Josiah (2 Chron 34:3-7) and was a central part of eighteen years of reforms. Five years later Jeremiah came to prominence speaking out against corrupt (though flourishing) worship based on temple ritual. They had a false confidence and complacency in God's past promises and protection and thought the use of meticulous ritual would save them from the consequences of **the moral and spiritual corruption in the heart of the nation.** This was fake news. False media. Radical change was needed. It didn't happen. Josiah died at the battle of Megiddo by an ill-conceived attempt to get in the way of supporting the wrong side of a clash of civilisations. Taking on the Egyptians they lost, and the Egyptians installed a new king, Jehoiakim, who also had to pay heavy taxes and tributes to Egypt. He reversed many of Josiah's reforms and introduced stony heart changes. Blatant greed. Arrogance. Injustice. He and Jeremiah really didn't get along. It is this king where in his palace in winter as the prophecies of Jeremiah were read to him, cut them up and fed them into the fire (Jer 36). Ezekiel would have been seventeen years old.

The Egyptians moved north to support the failing empire of Assyria in the face of the growing Babylonian threat. It ended in disaster at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, one of the most significant battles of the ancient world. Babylon won big time.

Nebuchadnezzar then started to extend and develop Babylonian power and influence, and that influence included sorting out Judah. Judah replaced Egyptian taxes for Babylonian. Resources now flowed north rather than south. Jehoiakim stayed on. The king then decided to stick with the Egyptians and rebelled against the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem after a three-month siege. We are not quite sure what happened to Jehoiakim. He was captured (1 Chron 36:6) and killed. Some suggest he was kidnapped by a pro Babylonian party in Jerusalem and handed over to be executed. Un mourned he simply “disappeared.”

Meanwhile Jehoiachin was king for a short while but as the city surrendered he was replaced (2 Kings 24:5-7). Although when Jerusalem fell for the first time Nebuchadnezzar was reasonably charitable, he did not burn or destroy it, he merely looted it. Yet he also top-sliced the whole of the establishment of Israel’s society- including Jehoiachin and Ezekiel as a priest in training. They and 10,000 others were carted off to Babylon. Officers, soldiers, craftsman, community leaders, the next generation of bright young things were carted off in baggage trains heading north. **Aged 25 Ezekiel, as with everyone else, was ripped from their homeland, torn from all that they held dear to be incorporated and dumped into a strange dominant culture and placed in refugee camps set up by the canals of Babylon.** Canals that were a key part of the economic lifeblood of the empire and its war machine.

It was five years after this first deportation that God met with Ezekiel in exile by the Kebar canal and commissioned him, not as a priest, for which he has been trained, but as a prophet. **Aged 30 God sent him to a people in exile.** So, we can, perhaps be best rest assured that this is image of Ezekiel by Michelangelo that sits on the Sistine chapel ceiling bears no resemblance at all to what Ezekiel was like, but it does tell us something about the story of power and patronage and religion- in the heart of the matter.



Ezekiel was sent to a people that he already lived amongst- albeit in exile. If he had been sent to foreigners whose language was hard and he didn’t understand- including

perhaps the Babylonians and other refugee camps of nations caught up in the expanding empire- they would have listened. **An irony that God pointed out to him. Instead he went to the house of Israel in exile, who would fail to listen, fail to understand, fail to respond. Stony heart thinking. Ezekiel means “May God strengthen him.” He would need it.**

Ezekiel really was passionate about God. His life was shaped by what he knew and understood about God’s power, God’s word. God’s Spirit and God’s authority. The presence of God. The holiness of God. The glory of God. The vision of God he had by the Kebar canal was shattering and shaping. It transformed him as a person and marked him for a lifetime call and vocation. It is from this **he really saw with great clarity the consequences and power of stony heart thinking. What brought corruption and dirt into people’s lives, actions and society. What disfigured a community** that was meant to be based on covenant and promise but broke both the relationship of the covenant and so easily broke the promises that flowed from it. **A great divorce and divergence that cemented the stony heart thinking. It led to truly horrible consequences. Hard hearted. Unfeeling. Stony hearted inhumanity.** Yet it wasn’t all denouncement. It included deliverance too.

There are two parts to Ezekiel but united by the fact that all his life he lived among people who had suffered dislocation, loss trauma. The physical and emotional stress of being far from home and loved ones. The first part is through to chapter 23, the story of the first deportation (of which he was a part) and dealing with the shallow optimism of the myth of return and that Jerusalem at least would never be destroyed. Chapter 24 is the turning point. The end of the old world. The destruction of Jerusalem and with it the second deportation. More terrible and heart rending than the first. Survivors starved from months of siege and the long-forced march start appearing in the camps. A time of national bereavement. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. No family would have been untouched. Relatives who died from hunger, disease, slaughter. An abyss of disbelief it had all ended in disaster, defeat and destruction- gone up in the pyres of smoke as the city and temple burned. Was there any future now? Where was God in this?



What marks both sections is the same promise. Here found in chapter 11 verse 19 ***“I will give them a new heart and a new mind. I will take away their stubborn heart of stone and will give them an obedient heart. They will keep my laws and faithfully obey all my commandments. They will be my people and I will be their God.”*** This is the heart of the covenant made in Exodus, repeated in Exile and repeated again in Ezk 36 after the refugee camps were swelled again with ruined human beings. People, ruthlessly removed, purged and transported into exile. Ezk 36:26-28 says ***“I will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient heart. I will put my Spirit in you and I will see to it that you follow my laws and keep my commands I have given you.... You will be my people and I will be your God....”***

Here in *chapter 11*, is part of the story that goes back to *Chapter 8*. The exit of God’s glory. Ezekiel is confined to his house, but the elders of the exile are sat there in front of him. The date is 17th September 592 BC. Ezekiel is peppered with dates. He is in Babylon. Jerusalem is a thousand miles away. Now, he is shifted in a vision to the eastern gate of the temple. He witnesses the discussions of building projects by a group of leaders as if the recent surrender and defeat of the city hasn’t happened. Pompous people, unaware of the mayhem to come. They are at the same gate where Ezekiel has just seen and recounted the glory of God departing the city. Business goes on as usual it seems. 25 leaders of the landed and privileged class secure in their complacent optimism talk about how things can only get better. They were over the worst. Growth and prosperity were around the corner. **To reassure stony heart thinking is to be complicit and to condone and therefore collaborate with the hard heartedness. Not to protest, to challenge is not just to acquiesce but to be assimilated into the ranks of the stony hearted. There is an arrogance that goes**

with stony hearts. They saw themselves as the “choice cuts”, they would not simply survive but flourish, succeed and prosper. They were not like other people.

The “offal” were the former leaders and the people carted off to exile. They were written out and written off. In their absence there were rich pickings they would profit from. Maximise the opportunities. Grab the land. Dispossess the poor. Ignore the poorer ordinary folk in the city and the country side. Make a killing. Sometimes literally.

Yet God’s view on this was to turn it upside down. Those who think themselves safe would suffer the same contempt they had for the victims, the victimised and the foreigners. They will not escape. In his vision Ezekiel sees Pelatiah, someone known to him, drop down dead. That is common to all the schemes of men and the imaginations of stony hearts where death is the final arbiter and then comes the judgment.

Yet this passage is not all darkness, disaster and gloom but a ray of hope. God does not simply contradict this view from the street but turns it upside down. The exiles are not lost from history despite being removed from the city and the holy places to an unholy land. God himself is their sanctuary. He is present with them and they are in God’s presence. They are not forsaken or forgotten by God. Indeed, God is present with them in a way that is deeper and tighter than those in the homeland.

So, the elders sit in front of him at his house listening to this. They were from the same class as those still left behind in Jerusalem. For some of them the corruption and opportunism in society, politics, and religion would have been no surprise. They may have been players once themselves in those games. For others the exposure would have been a bit of a surprise. In response they could shoot the messenger or mock the messenger, or simply deny it. Deny the truth, tough it out, take a stony-hearted response. Truth can be hard and unpalatable. It can be dangerous. A calling to account. A bringing into the light. It can be a painful business. A stony-hearted mask of avoidance and hiding from accountability, let alone repentance and restitution. This is an easier option, particularly if you have a lot to lose. An opening of records. A taking of evidence. The slow revelation of attitudes and actions. Exposure. Possible ruin. Loss of reputation. Loss of money. Loss of position. A defining moment when reality catches up with you. A stony heart.

But Ezekiel looks to see things not from a human point of view, the common-sense view, the cultural assumptions, the perspective of the winners and the strong- but from God’s point of view. About rescue, salvation. That there is hope. The fact that God not history or circumstances will restore and bring hope. Hope based in **God’s motivation to save human beings that become open to a “change of heart” to receive a new heart of flesh. From stony hearts to open life receiving hearts, life giving hearts.** It is not grounded in human need but on the fact that it starts with God’s love that pities, has compassion. That shows mercy. Who grieves over our mistakes and misdirection. Who longs for our return. Rejoices over our restoration. Celebrates our home coming.

All human life belongs to God as Creator and that God intends to open the invitation to everyone to return and relate to Him. **The way home from exile is seen in the coming of Jesus and the depth of relationship changing from a stony heart to a living open heart. To an individual heart as a warm-hearted relationship.** Not as a cold respecter of religion or of fearful service but a living, growing, deepening relationship based on love, grace and forgiveness. That begins and ends with God not simply as Creator but as Father. Where we are brought into the presence of God by the Son who died for us while we were yet sinners to find a way home from exile. Whether by our own stupidity or greed, like the son who ended up feeding pigs for a living and half-starved has a change of heart and goes back home. A father's heart love that throws dignity to the wind and runs and embraces his smelly half-starved son and, in his joy, throws a party.



The Spirit of God reveals and endorses the fact that we are not orphans, we are family where Jesus himself tells us that **the Father loves us (John 16:27). This is not a stony heart. That's a heart of flesh. An open heart that allows for a change of heart.** A sorrow and repentance for mistakes made and a humility to say sorry and ask for forgiveness. Firstly, of God, from the starting point of his character and nature not ours. But secondly ethically it leads to change not just in our relationship of coming home to God's love but the home love of God. It extends through us to love of neighbour, of enemy, and to the nations. **That this becomes an ethic of open hearted, compassionate loving mercy marked by the cross, empowered by the Spirit to lead a resurrection life.**

So finally, if God reveals to us those things in the secret places where we are driven by a false striving of security, or arrogance, or complacency, **do we have a stony heart, a hard heart of silence, of refusal. Or an open-hearted willingness to listen to acknowledge and change with God's help?**