

Address from Howard Friend, 16 May 2021

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Sunday after Ascension Day

Ezekiel 36 v 24 – 28, John 17 v 6 – 19

You don't develop a hard heart overnight. It takes time. And then suddenly - like a heart attack - it hits you.

I remember - as if it were yesterday - doing a ward round in Malawi with a Medical Student from the UK. I think she'd only got off the plane that morning. She was keen. It was a pretty ordinary ward round for me. About 40 very sick children top and tailed in 20 beds (Kids with the usual Malaria, Meningitis and underlying Malnutrition) – and during the course of the morning - 3 deaths – which wasn't that unusual - and the attendant wailing from all the mothers that is the normal free expression of grief in that setting. And this poor girl just started crying. It was all too much.

Now the point here is that hers was the normal reaction. She had a soft heart. It was my heart that had become hardened, you might argue, of professional necessity. She taught me to see such suffering and the reasons for it - anew.

Hardness of heart. It creeps up on you. The first time you pass a homeless person on the street you feel really bad. Soon you learn to quicken your step – pass by on the other side.

Was indifference to the suffering of others the 'Hardness of Heart' that Ezekiel was referring to in our first reading? Well partly I suggest - but that wasn't the whole story.

We perhaps romanticise the story and feel sorry for the exiled Israelites weeping by the waters of Babylon too homesick to play their traditional music. - But they had been warned!

Ezekiel chapter 22 chronicles the evidence of their Hard Heartedness – the reason for their exile. Basically they had forgotten about God, learned to live without him, lost in the pursuit of personal wealth. Bribery and corruption were rife. Sexual abuse common. The widow, orphan and immigrant abandoned to their fate.

Sounds sort of familiar doesn't it?

Hardness of heart in all its forms – it creeps up on you. And then suddenly you're made aware.

Now, I want to update the Cardiac Imagery Ezekiel uses: Heart of Stone / Heart of Flesh – Hard heart / Soft heart to something more relevant to our modern age. Never let it be said that St David's / Michael's is behind the times.

The main pathology of the diseased 'First World' heart is narrowing of the Coronary Arteries – as is well known. And - as many of you will know - clever Cardiologists can now insert a catheter via a groin or elbow artery, have a good look at the arteries of our hearts to see where the blockage is and then do a rebore and / or insert a small cage like structure called a stent to keep the heart artery open and prevent the scarring, the hardness, the death of the heart muscle itself.

So - what would the divine Cardiac catheter and angiogram make of our spiritual coronary arteries? Would they be blocked with the debris of self interest?

Would it throw light on our shortcomings: our abandoning of Godly principles - our lack of care for the disadvantaged, the environment, our sexual misdemeanors, our financial greed, our corruption?

The answer if we're honest is yes. It's no good us looking back on the Israelites in Exile and pretending we're really any different from them.

We – each of us – have developed Hardness of heart of various sorts. Hardness which estranges us from God.

Hardness of heart creeps up on us until suddenly we're made aware. Like the narrowing of the coronary arteries which eventually produces that chest pain that says – now you know you've got a problem.

But here's the good news – the rather extraordinary news which is just as relevant now as it was then – and it's this:

If the Spirit of God is the instrument of our being made aware of our own hardness of heart then just like the Cardiac catheter it offers a solution – the Holy Spirit stent - if you like - to deal with the underlying problem to make our heart function normally again.

Let's take a step back from the modern medical metaphor- not before time some of you might be thinking - and remind ourselves perhaps in more traditional terms that: God's Holy Spirit searches the deep places of our hearts but doesn't condemn us. He offers us healing a change of heart – a stent.

The main reason I suggest a change of metaphor from the Heart transplant - Stone to Flesh image of Ezekiel - is that in my experience this change of heart that the Love of God effects in our lives is more gradual, more incremental more like having successive stents inserted than a one-off Total Heart Transplant.

God is always seeking to soften our hearts and deepen our relationship with him - we therefore constantly need to examine them. (Our Hearts)

Finally: How about a poetic or liturgical turn of phrase to examine this Heart Problem. It's in a prayer we use every Sunday and which we tend to skip through without reflecting on what we've said. But it expresses the challenge well and is worth closer examination

It is of course our: the Prayer of Preparation

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name.

Hardness of Heart – it creeps up on you.

But God's love is always surprising us.

May our hearts be open to his transforming love today and every day.