**Family Service Talk 9th February 2025**

**Ezekiel 36:24-30**

***24‘“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. 25I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26I 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. 27And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. 28Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. 29I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the corn and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. 30I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine.***

What a beautiful picture this must have been for the people of Israel when Ezekiel shared these words with them. They were in exile in Babylon, having been forcibly taken there - punishment for their disobedience to God. And now they had heard that Jerusalem had fallen and the temple burnt down all because of their continued disobedience. Ezekiel had warned that there would be consequences to their behaviour but they had taken no notice and now it had happened. God must have completely abandoned them – how devastated they must have felt.

But now instead of the doom and gloom messages that they were used to from Ezekiel, here was something beautiful and hopeful! Although …. it must also have felt totally undeserved, unlikely and certainly impossible to attain …..

They were to be …. ~ taken home ~ washed clean ~ given a new soft heart ~ helped to live God’s way ~ settled in a restored land

Wow, this was good news but surely it couldn’t be for them, they had been way too bad!

But hang on, let us just go back a few years …. Who was Ezekiel? Why were the Jews even in Babylon? And what exactly was it that they had done wrong?

Ezekiel was born and brought up in the land of Judah, the son of a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. He was preparing to be a priest in the temple himself but then, in 597 BC, the Babylonians attacked Judah and Ezekiel was taken, along with thousands of other Jews, to Babylon where they lived in exile. Even though prophets had warned the Israelites that this would happen if they didn’t change their ways and turn back to God, it must have been devastating …. God must surely have abandoned them.

About 5 years later, the Israelites had settled in Babylon and, in many cases, were living like the Babylonians, worshipping their gods and completely ignoring the laws that the one true God had given them many generations beforehand. But God was not finished with his people and he appeared to Ezekiel in a vision, giving him a message to give to the people of Israel. It was a very tough message requiring Ezekiel to be strong and resilient - qualities that God gave him in order to stand up to the Israelites who had become hardened and obstinate.

Ezekiel had to remind the people that it was their disobedience to God’s ways that had resulted in them being driven from the promised land into Babylon. And once there, you would think that they would have tried to improve (and maybe they did at first) but very soon they were back to square-one again doing exactly what they wanted and certainly not living the way God wanted them to. They would listen to Ezekiel bring God’s message but then go and worship Babylonian gods and rebel against the one true God whom they should honour and obey.

Ezekiel told them that their attitude would bring further punishment but they continued to go their ‘own sweet way’. Finally, they heard from those left in Judah that Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians and the temple had been burned down. It couldn’t get any worse …. How could they be rescued now? ….. Surely God would now abandon them to the result of their sin and disobedience?

But no! That was not God’s way …. He loved his people and wanted to bless them and help…. (even if that sometimes meant some ’tough love’!!)

And our passage this morning shows that God did indeed have a plan to **retrieve** …., **refresh** …., **renew** …. and **restore** his sinful, disobedient people. And all this despite the fact that it would be undeserved and unmerited. It was **God’s** plan for his sinful, wayward people whom he loved and wanted to be with. A plan only possible through and by God’s incredible grace. Every sentence in his message through Ezekiel included the words ‘I will ….’. In other words, God would do it all!!

He would ….

**Retrieve ….** Bring the people back to their own land.

**Refresh ….** Cleanse each person with clean water (like the clean water used by the priests when they were consecrated into God’s service).  **….** Wash them to get rid of their sinful ways.

**Renew ….** Remove their frozen, solid hearts which could no longer respond to God’s word and his love and replace them with hearts ready to hear and obey God **….** Fill them with his Spirit that would enable them to listen to God and obey his laws

**Restore ….** The land and make it fruitful for the people to live in **….** thus, enabling the surrounding nations to see God’s power and his holiness

And this is exactly what happened to the remnant of the Israelites after 70 years in exile. They did return to the Promised land having been refreshed and renewed by God and there he restored them in order to flourish as a beacon of God’s holiness, power and hope among the nations.

Sadly, the people had neither learned the lessons of the exile, nor did they listened to the long line of prophets who brought God’s words to the people and they continued to live sinful lives in disobedience to God.

But, wonderfully and incredibly, God’s love for his people did not stop with man’s disobedience…. As Ezekiel alluded to in chapter 34 of his book *(Ezekiel 34:23-25)*, God would, in time, place over his people a shepherd, his servant David, (the Messiah), to tend them. And, as Isaiah made clear in his book, the Messiah was coming to suffer, die and rise again in order that **all** who believe in him and are sorry for their sin and disobedience, may be washed clean from sin with the water of life that Jesus brings and be restored to a right relationship with God.

And this will mean that **all** people can see God’s power to **retrieve, refresh, renew and restore** in Christians everywhere and as a result may turn to the God of all truth and holiness …. and believe.

And this is where we come into this picture. The beauty of the gospel message is that it is by God’s grace alone that any of us are **retrieved, refreshed, renewed and restored**. God made it very clear through Ezekiel that it would be Him alone who would do these things.

***I will*** *– take you – gather you – bring you (24)* **…. Retrieval**

***I will*** *– sprinkle clean water – cleanse you (25)* **…. Refreshment**

***I will*** *– give you a new heart – put a new spirit in you – move you to keep my laws (26 - 27)* **…. Renewal**

***I will*** *– rebuild the ruins (33) – resettle the towns (33) – I will do it! (36)* **…. Restoration**

It is for us, therefore, to respond to God in gratitude for his grace …. and obedience in our lives to his will and way …. as our response to his grace and love.

As we do this, may others see his holiness, power to save, grace and love in all that we do and say. And by God’s grace, may they then turn and seek him in faith and know the **retrieval, refreshment, renewal and restoration** he brings to all who turn to him. Amen.