

## **Open Door – Hebrews 3:7-9, 12-14**

Open our minds and soften our hearts to your word this morning, O Lord our God. Amen

At the end of your rows you should find a pot of playdoh. If you wish I invite you to take a piece of playdoh and play with it, mould it in your hands and shape it.

What happens to playdoh when it's left out and not played with?

It hardens, it dries up, it can no longer be shaped and moulded.

Think of this as being like the hardened hearts that our reading from Hebrews warns us against. As we move on to explore chapter 3, the writer continues to encourage readers to fix our eyes on Jesus, who, whilst being the one who created the heavens and earth, is also present with us and walks alongside us throughout our lives. The writer challenges us to be different to the Israelites in the desert, who turned away from God and hardened their hearts.

You may recall the story – the Israelites had been rescued from Egypt, there were lots of plagues – frogs, boils, locusts to name a few – before the Israelites escaped into the wilderness and crossed the Red Sea. Then it's almost as if they forget what God has done for them... the complaining begins – “I'm hungry”, “Are we nearly there yet?”, “I'm tired”, “I'm thirsty” – sound familiar?! In their tiredness and disappointment at their new life in the desert, the Israelites harden their hearts against God and forget what He has done for them. Like the playdoh left out to dry, they stop letting God change their hearts, to mould them into His people, and they try and fail to carry on without Him.

Sometimes we all get tired, disappointed or tempted on our journey with God - we try to live life without Him, our way and not his, letting our sin drag us down; or we get weary and sad as we feel our prayers are not being answered or life never quite works out the way we hope. Our hearts can become hardened to God.

The good news is that keeping our hearts soft is not a struggle we have to keep at by ourselves... In fact, quite the opposite, says the writer of Hebrews. As the body of Christ, we are called to follow Jesus in community with each other. And as part of community the writer of Hebrews says that

we ought to exhort each other every day to stop each other's hearts from hardening.

Does anyone know what the word exhort means?

It means to strongly encourage or urge someone to do something. It's like super encouragement. In Greek literature, which is the language this part of the Bible was originally written in, the word for exhort was also used to describe the way a military commander encouraged his soldiers into battle. A battle cry of encouragement.

Sometimes our Christian lives can feel like a battle against the world around us, as we stand up for what we believe, or people just don't get why we are here on a Sunday morning. Jesus warns us that living in the world is not easy, even when we trust in Him. Our faith can also be a battle against ourselves, as we struggle against desires and wills that pull us away from God, weariness and disappointments that stop us caring, and perhaps even the little voice that tells us the lie that we aren't good enough for God. And that's why we all need encouragement, exhortations, battle cries to keep us going, to keep our hearts soft and moulded by God.

Some of that encouragement comes from meeting together - worshipping, praying and listening to God's word, sharing in bread and wine. Encouraging each other as we affirm our faith - reminding one another that Jesus 'lives in our hearts through faith, and fills us with his love'. And our shout of encouragement in the dismissal, when we are sent out to 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord' - to keep our hearts soft and go out from here to live out our faith in the everyday, not just on a Sunday.

What then might every day encouragement look like for us? How can we encourage each other to keep our hearts soft? As the letter to the Ephesians says 'I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers'. Regularly praying for, and with each other, is powerful and something we can all do whatever our age or however long we've been a Christian.

How about sharing with someone how God is at work in our lives and how we see God at work in each other? Encouragement can also be found in being real about the challenges of following Jesus and perhaps being willing to challenge each other, even when that's uncomfortable.

What have you read in your Bible recently that might encourage someone else? Perhaps a verse or a story that has helped you? Sometimes the battle cry we need to share is simply that God loves us, that He cares for us and that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. That whatever we've done or whoever we are, God's grace is always sufficient for us.

It can be tempting to turn up for church, be encouraged for ourselves, and carry on with life. But the message of Hebrews cautions against this. It says that we are called together as a community to fix our eyes on Jesus, to care deeply that each others' hearts are kept soft, so that we can all keep receiving God's love and be shaped into the people God has created us to be. We might not be the people you'd choose to spend time with, but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the privilege of being partners in Christ together.

Encouragement softens our hearts, it moulds and shapes us to recognise God at work in our lives and draws us nearer to Him. So how might you encourage someone today and this week in their walk with Jesus? What might be the battle cry you can use to cheer someone on in their Christian journey?