

Texts: Luke 15:11-20 and Ephesians 3:14-19

Sunday 16th June 2019

Brightons Parish Church

You'll be glad to hear that we are on the penultimate week of our sermon series on Luke chapter 15, and next week's Sunday School Closing Service will round off this series.

Last week we explored the robe and ring in the parable of the prodigal Father, and we saw that these symbolised pardon and position for the younger son. We asked ourselves whether we, as adopted sons or daughters of God, were sharing in the great adventure of faith? Are we living out our pardon and position, or have we tamed the life of faith to something comfortable, something familiar, but something less than God wants for us?

We asked those questions amidst a “Weekend of Invitation”, where we were all encouraged to invite someone along to church, and it was heartening to see around a dozen or so newer faces, which is about 9% of our weekly adult attendance here on a Sunday morning.

We did that “Weekend of Invitation” within the “Thy Kingdom Come” prayer movement, which is an international, interdenominational season of prayer, where the church at large is encouraged to pray and especially to pray for others to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

And we partnered in both these initiatives because to introduce people to Jesus, to be part of their journey of faith, where they come to trust and follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, well that's one of the greatest adventures we can participate in – because as we heard last week, God is on an adoption adventure and by that He seeks to heal our broken world. This isn't about evangelism and conversion for their own sake – this is about participating in the very mission of God, at the heart of which, is people coming to know Him and being reconciled to Him through Jesus. And so, helping people to know and follow Jesus is a key way of sharing in the adventure of God and a key way of sharing in a process takes us beyond comfort and what is familiar.

The “how” of doing this in our current society...

is one of the greatest quandaries of our time, and we often do not feel equipped or ready to participate in this part of the adventure. But I'm reminded of a colleague's third year theological project, which was about mission in the 21st century. She explored a variety of issues, but within that project **she included this quote:**

'The challenge for the church is to recognise that while not all of what postmodernity stands for is good, there are values that this generation holds that provide a key for how the church could communicate the message of Jesus Christ to a very post-Christian generation.'

(Brian Krum, *The Missional Shift of Youth Ministry: from cookie cutter to incarnational ministry*)

The principle thing I take away from this is that there are ways to engage with today's generation, which could very well refer to anyone under the age of 50, but the key to engage with them is to know their values. Now, there are many values we could highlight but the ones of relevance this morning are: spirituality, the experimental (or experiential) and authenticity. So, these young folks are not interested in religious duty or more knowledge or good morals or acts and forms of religion. But what they are open to is a faith that makes a real difference in life, and which is also experiential. Now, when it comes to their desire for an experiential spirituality, I wonder if we sometimes scoff at that, or denounce it as part of hedonistic Western culture, a culture that appears to simply seek one experience after another. But you know,...

**I wonder if we have always sought this out? For example,
we have our well-loved Psalms:**

**‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go
and meet with God?’ (Psalm 42:2)**

‘The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.**

**He guides me along the right paths
for his name’s sake.’ (Psalm 23:1-3)**

**If we’re brutally honest, to attempt to understand these
Psalms without involving some experiential dynamic
simply guts all meaning and relevance from the them...**

So, if we're honest, we also want to experience God – we want our souls refreshed by God, we want led and helped and provided for. But I wonder if we actually expect God to come through on these ideas, or do we just settle for the comfort of nice words but without the comfort of God Himself? If this is the case, then maybe today's generation is not as hedonistic as we might think; maybe they simply are not willing to settle for concepts and flowery words, and instead they want to see and know God as a true being and presence.

And maybe all this terrifies you or confounds you? Maybe you appreciate that this is what young people seek and expect, what they (and we) hunger for, but you don't know how to join up the dots? You're not sure how that hunger and expectation might be met?

Well, I have some good news for you – our very familiar parable, the parable of the prodigal Father, reveals a God who wants to provide the very answers and needs of our moment in history, our missional moment.

In the midst of the parable **we read these words:**

‘But while he [the younger son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.’ (Luke 15:20)

Now, we have looked at just about every part of this verse – the watching and waiting of the Father; the compassion the Father felt at the son’s return such that He ran towards His child; and we have looked at what comes after this moment, with the robe, the ring and the response of the elder brother.

But we have skimmed over the words: the Father...‘threw his arms round him and kissed him.’ The Father...‘threw his arms round him and kissed him.’ In these very words we see a God, Father God, who is ready to draw close, embrace us, and be affectionate, be demonstrative in His relationship with us.

Now, you may wonder if I am making a mountain out of a mole hill here, or whether I am turning parable into allegory? But as we have seen, Jesus is very deliberate in His storytelling, for He draws on the customs of the day and ensures that this parable is as loaded with meaning about Father God as possible. So, I don’t think it stretches the purpose of the parable to focus on these words in a little more detail, for in truth,...

their meaning is picked up and expanded upon again and again elsewhere in the New Testament.

For example, we read **in Ephesians 3 today:**

**‘I pray that you...may have power...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.’
(Ephesians 3:17-19)**

Here Paul speaks of knowing the love of Jesus, the love of God, such that we are filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. “the fullness of God” in Ephesians refers to the way God makes his presence and power felt, that in experiencing Christ Christians experience the fullness of God, his presence, and His power...

For Paul is praying that they will experience a greater measure of the divine presence in their lives such that they partake of God's own being and are made like him. Now, as Paul makes clear, here and elsewhere, this is an ongoing process, but it is an experiential process nonetheless, yet we tend to gloss over such nuances and uncomfortable truths. However, once again we see that we have a God who is ready to draw close, embrace us and be demonstrative in His relationship with us.

Or take the prayer of **Jesus in chapter 17 John's gospel: Jesus prayed... 'Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they [current and future disciples] know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in**

order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’ (John 17:25-26)

Again, we must gloss over or twist these words if we are to take away any sense of God being close, embracing us and being demonstrative in His relationship with us.

Or, what about Paul’s **words to the Romans:**

‘And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’ (Romans 5:5)

Now, Paul is not simply meaning here that we are to love like God, that we have a loving heart, for then it would have little relevance to having hope – you don’t have hope because you have a loving heart towards others...

No, you have hope because you have something within you that sustains you, and what sustains the Christian is God's very own love – a love, which Paul says here, is poured into our hearts, the centre of our being, not simply into our minds, where it can be kept as a nice concept, but rather, it is poured in here, so that it is known deep in our being and able to nourish true and lasting hope.

So, once again, we see that the wider teaching of the New Testament is of a relationship with God wherein He is close, embracing and demonstrative; He is not distant, He is not cold, He is the Father who threw His arms round the younger son and kissed him. And likewise, God wants to come close, embrace us and be demonstrative...

[STORY OF PRAYER IN CAR FOR WEDDING]

So, how is it that Father God draws close, embraces us and demonstrates His love? How will today's younger generations come into that experience of God which they expect or yearn for?

Well, whether it be in Ephesians 3, or in Romans chapter 5, or in John's gospel from chapters 3 to chapter 20, in all these places and in every portion of the New Testament, it is by the person of the Holy Spirit that we are given help to know the Father's love, to know His nearness and embrace. Romans 5 is maybe the most succinct:

'God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.' (Romans 5:5)

Note here that Paul refers to the Holy Spirit, ‘who has been given’ – ‘who’...a person. It is easy to slip into referring to the Holy Spirit as ‘it’, because we are tempted to think about the Holy Spirit as a force, or energy or some kind of ghostly presence. But the clear teaching of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit is a person, the Holy Spirit is God’s personal presence amongst us. He is one of the three persons of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God but three Persons.

Notice what else Paul says here about this third Person of God: the Holy Spirit ‘has been given to us’ – ‘has been given’, as in, this has already happened, and this has happened ‘to us’, to any person who claims the title Christian and affirms Jesus as Lord and Saviour...

So, anyone who claims to be a Christian has the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of God residing in them, in our hearts; we have become a temple of God's presence, as Paul says to the Corinthians.

So, why am I labouring this point? Well, as we have seen, the Holy Spirit is the means by which Father God helps us to know His love, to know His nearness and embrace. This is given to each and every Christian, as we have seen, and so to each and every Christian is given the means by which to know the Father's love, His nearness and embrace, just like the younger son. And it will be by that same Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, that the Father's love, nearness and embrace will be imparted to those younger generations who want a faith that is more than mere words on an old page or good moral and religious duty.

But here's the thing: can we, each, speak of knowing the Spirit's work in our lives? For young people today, it isn't enough to point to an old book and claim it as truth – they want to know how these old words have come alive in your own life, they want to hear and see them in reality.

I came across a helpful illustration this past week...(pg99 of Mark Stibbe, *The Father You've Been Waiting For.*)

What's the lesson of the story for us this morning? It is this: don't settle for second-hand relationship, or second-hand religion; we each should and must pursue the real thing for ourselves. We each should and must pursue a real, authentic relationship with God, by His Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, His very presence amongst us...

Because a dynamic life of faith is not meant to be the reserve of the few; a dynamic life of faith, where we know the Father's love, nearness and embrace is meant to be the bread and butter of all God's people, for the Holy Spirit has been given to one and all who claim the title Christian, and so the Holy Spirit is ready to lead us into the Father's embrace.

And if we want to help the younger generations see that the Christian faith meets their hunger and expectations, then we must be able to share our own stories of faith and be ready to point them in the direction of a God who is ready to draw close, embrace them and be demonstrative.

Now, there probably isn't a quick fix to this, it will take time,...

it will take some learning and maybe even some unlearning of previous ideas. It will likely involve us going deeper in our own faith journey first, of being willing to admit that maybe there's more to God and the life of faith than we ever imagined and maybe have ever experienced.

To help towards that, the Discipleship Team are planning an Alpha Course in the autumn session, beginning on the 18th September and running to the end of November. The Alpha course is a great way to explore, or re-explore, some of the core aspects of the Christian faith, so we are giving you 3 months' notice in the hope you'll make the time to come along and take a new step in the adventure of faith, by giving Alpha a try.

But the Discipleship Team also hope that some of us might consider inviting friends, family or neighbours to the Alpha course. The Weekend of Invitation was really just the beginning of a process: we all need to regularly invite others to come and find out more about this God who wants to draw close, embrace us and be demonstrative. And so, maybe the next step in the adventure of faith is for us is to invite someone to Alpha, to invite someone to come see that the hunger and expectation they have of God, can be found in this God, who has revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who is ready, so very ready, to throw His arms round and embrace all who return to Him.

May it be so. Amen.