

God Centred – People focussed – 15th November 2009

(6th in a series “The Church as perceived by the world”)

St George’s Anglican Church, Epsom, Auckland

Readings O/T: Deuteronomy 24:19-22
 N/T: Romans 12: 9-16
 Gospel: Matt 6:19-24

The Velveteen rabbit was a soft toy that belonged to a little boy and was the newest addition to the array of his other toys in the nursery.

When the boy went to sleep, the toys would start talking, and the Velveteen rabbit wanted to find out from his nursery family what being real was, because the other toys used to talk about being real. One night he asked them, “What is real?” In the nursery was an old skin horse that had been there longer than the other toys. He was worn and bald and quite ragged because he had been played with the most, and was the wisest toy in the nursery, and so he answered the rabbit.

“It’s what happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

‘Does it hurt?’ Asked the rabbit.

“Sometimes” said the horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once like being wound up, or bit by bit?” he asked.

“It doesn’t happen all at once” said the horse. “You become. It takes a long time.....generally by time you are real most of your hair has been loved off , your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all because once you are real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”¹

The horse was proclaiming a beautiful biblical idea - that being loved by another brings into one’s experience all sorts of things that make one come alive in a new and exciting way. Being loved affirms that we are special to someone and gives us a sense of self-worth, - even a purpose for our lives. Being loved triggers and awakens within us our own capacity to love back and become a tender lover ourselves. Being loved helps us see our own world and circumstance as beautiful and blessed and helps ugliness and pessimism to fade. Being loved makes us become someone – someone real. The old horse knew that he was real because he was threadbare and tatty as a result of all the love he’d received. If he’d never been touched with the playful gleeful excited and sometimes even rough hands of the little boy, he’d never have felt real.

So it is with us because God’s love poured into our lives makes us real², and my prayer would be that we will all know something of that by the way God’s love can change and mould us to become – to become more in His likeness and become more aware of His purpose for us. When we think about our lives and when we reflect on how God’s love has reached us, and when we realise that we are real to God, God then becomes real to us, we become real to ourselves and we

¹ *The Velveteen Rabbit*: Margery Williams

² Rom 5:5

become real to each other. How do we know God is real? There is a resonance deep within us that is beyond words to explain. It is a confidence that is the reward of faith.³

It speaks into our spirit and makes us certain, quite certain, that God is real, and there is peace. A natural consequence of discovering the life-giving magic of God's love is the desire to rejoice in it and also to bring God's love to others so that they can become real too.

We are blessed to become a blessing. God's love will flow out of our lives to make someone else real. If we are God centred it will be natural for us to be a conduit for God's love to, be people focussed.

This is God's plan for His love to be spread throughout the earth. Look at the promise to Abraham. Through the Israelites *all peoples on earth will be blessed*⁴. They were to be special people set apart, and by being God centred in the way they lived, their neighbours would be blessed by them – the nations of the world would be introduced to God's love by them. They were to be *a light to the gentiles*⁵.

If we are God centred then we too should be a blessing to our neighbours.

What sort of witness in our neighbourhood could we become if we are truly God centred?

We come to church and we each bring our gifts that God has given us and together we make up a community of faith in this neighbourhood. There is huge potential for us to be a blessing to the people of this area. Can we do that better? Are there areas that we have not yet ventured in to by which we can show our neighbours the love of God, and bring life, new life, real life into this part of the world where God has placed us.

There was to be a difference in the way the Israelites lived that marked them out against others. They were to show the character of God and attract their neighbours to trust God. The way the Israelites were to relate to their neighbours was to be loving and caring – in contrast to the warlike selfishness and hatred that was all around them.

We get some beautiful revelations of how they were to be in the regulations of the Levitical law, because like a golden thread weaving through the mass of curious edicts that touch on every aspect of life are shafts of beauty that show the heart of God. There is myriad of regulations in these early books of the Old Testament that touch on every imaginable aspect of life in such detail that when we read them we find them odd and eccentric, but to be found in them is a stream of very deep exposure of the character of God that gives overarching meaning to all the detail.

I want to mention 3 principles.

First, look at Leviticus 19:15.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD

Here the Israelites were told not to curse a deaf person or put a stumbling block in front of a blind person. Such conduct would be depraved in the extreme and not how one would behave if God centred. It is an illustration that has huge ethical implications because it is really telling us that it is not Godly to take advantage of another person's weakness or misfortune. How does that principle apply to life – to business for example?

³ Rom 8:12

⁴ Gen 12:2-3

⁵ Is 42:6

But secondly, look at Deut 24: 19-22.

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. 20 When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.

Here is a contrasting provision which shows what God centred conduct looks like. Annual harvests of wheat, olives and grapes were essential for basic nourishment and sustenance and every owner of a field and orchard had to make provision for those in the community who were marginalised would have a struggle to survive. The loving hand of God was stretched out to these people in this provision so that they could be comforted and relieved of stress and worry about their survival. But more so, in provisions such as these there was a spiritual and relational warmth that would feed the soul of the anxious and assure them that although they had problems, they were in a community of friends who would look out for them: conduct centred on God and people focussed.

Look at how this passage is ended:

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.⁶

The Israelites were always to remember that there was a time when they were on a state of plight and marginalisation and God's love reached them and gave them life and renewal, and so they were to behave to others as God had to them. That's how they were to be a light to the world.

So it is with us.

Finally, there are numerous times in these passages where it is recorded that God tells the Israelites to *Be Holy as I am Holy*. Such an injunction seems daunting to us because of its sheer impossibility. How can humanity possibly achieve such a standard? But as with every utterance of God's there has to be some message and meaning to be found that has relevance to us. Jesus took this phrase too, reminding His listeners of it when saying *Be perfect as I am perfect*⁷.

Some translations have this as *...always act as God would act*. The principle is, - that as God has been to us so also should we be to others: or even 'as I have been God to you, you be God to others'; 'as I have brought my love to you, you bring my love to others.'

We have been made real and alive by the power of God's love in our lives and so if we are God centred we will become people focussed as the Israelites were to be, and in turn bring God's life giving love to others.

This will be a joy to us, not a duty or an obligation, but an outflowing from us that cannot be restrained being a natural consequence of our lives being centred on God.

Stan Thorburn

⁶ Deut 24:22

⁷ Matt 5: 48