

SERMON – PREPARING TO ‘GO HOME’ - FINAL VERSION

READINGS

New Testament Reading Romans 8:38-39

First Gospel Reading John 15:4-11

Second Gospel Reading John 17

I want to say right from the off, that this message today is not just for people who are on the final pages of their life. This message is about the important wisdom we can learn from this stage of life, for all our stages of our life. So with this in mind, let's pray.

Loving and life-giving Creator God, we thank you for these words of Jesus. Words that remind us that our true spiritual state of being 'at home' is when we live and abide in an Your intimate, relational, loving presence. Through the power of Your life- bringing Spirit, show us today how we might live more fully in the presence of this truth.

When I came to the Christian faith 26 years ago, there were many things in my life that changed quite profoundly – but one of the most significant was this theme we are exploring today,

What does it look like for all of us to prepare well for our eventual ‘**going home**’ to be with our Creator God? To put it bluntly, what does it look like to prepare well for our eventual death.

And there's been 2 main reasons why my perspective on this began to change.

Firstly, around the same time as exploring the Christian faith, the band I'd been in for almost 30 years with my 2 brothers, had come to what felt like a crushing end. The feeling I had of being a failure was overwhelming.

But out of blue I got an invitation to come and do a ‘sing song’ in a care facility for people who were clearly in the final stages of their life. I'd never been in a room with so many people confronting the reality of death – and yet, all the residents sang with a real spirit of joy to the music that was clearly part of the fabric of their lives. *It's a Long Way to Tipperary; You Are My Sunshine.*

It began one the most profound journeys of my whole life. As I reflect on this, I find it interesting that it ran parallel to my early explorations of faith.

For the next 8 years I sang 4 to 5 times a week with my dad to many people on the final pages of their life story. It was also here that I really came to recognise the extraordinary power of music to reach deep into the human soul.

The second reason I've developed a different perspective on the reality of life and death, is that I began an ordination journey in 2007 to become a Priest. This culminated on our

arrival here in Aotearoa and St George's in August 2010 and I was ordained in the November.

And there have been so many privileges this ministry journey has given me, but the most sacred - is that I get to walk intimately alongside those who know they are about to die – and I get to be with them in their final moments - and often take their funerals.

And the biggest gift this close proximity to **death** has given me- has been to truly value the gift of **life**. Rather than living in fear of death, I now see death as a strong spiritual smelling salts that can awaken us out of our false belief that we will live forever.

And it's this truth of our faith that I want to explore today.

How can we prepare well for our death – by living well in our life.

There are those in our community who are on the final pages of their life.

There are many among us who know by the law of probability that we are in the final chapter, we're just not sure of how long this chapter will be.

And of course, the stark reality of life and death is that whatever your age and stage of life, none of us know when this final moment is going to happen.

So this a significant spiritual wisdom for all of us to explore.

A good place to start is by unpacking the profound wisdom Jesus gives us, about what it means to truly be 'home' with God.

Both of our Gospel passages today are from the gospel of John, and they are part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his own impending death on the Cross and '**going home**' to be with his Father God.

This whole discourse runs from Chapter 13 to 17 (its' huge) and contains some of the most revealing insights from Jesus into what our true '**spiritual home**' looks like for the reality of our lives and our faith.

And for me all the threads of what Jesus is trying to communicate in these 4 chapters, is gathered up in the final chapter. And what's really significant is that Jesus isn't just 'speaking' to us, this is Jesus' in a heartfelt prayer for all of us who would believe.

"I pray Father, that just as you are in me and I am in you. May they (you and I) also be in us.

Now I don't know if any of you counted how many times Jesus repeated the word **IN** for our 2 Gospel readings. But in the first Jesus emphasized this word 13 times in 7 verses and in the 2nd reading, 6 times in 3 verses.

For good measure Paul used it twice, including his favourite repeated phrase throughout all his letters. **IN** Christ. So clearly the word **IN** is a very telling one. And Something we should take 'Home' with us today.

So what are Jesus and Paul; trying to tell us?

Clearly for Jesus, our ultimate spiritual '**home**' is not a geographical place and it's not even just for the afterlife. Our true '**home**' is when we are IN an intimate, mutual union with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. And all through the New Testament this 'intimate union' is portrayed as a vital and life-giving state of *being*.

God is not a 'thing' to be understood, but a reality to be experienced.

God is not a concept we try to figure out –

our Triune God is a relationship we are called to experience.

And there are 2 big truths about this Divine Union we must hold onto.

Firstly, In this relationship of **mutual in-dwelling**, the word *mutual* is important. The relationship is reciprocal. God the Father and Jesus the Son, through the Spirit - make their **home in** us, and we make our **home in** them. They abide and reside **in** us, and we abide and reside **in** them. This says Jesus, is how we bear life-giving fruit.

Secondly, this gift of life-giving union, is for both **Now and into Eternity. It's an Eternal reality and a Present reality.** There is no separation. As Paul says, **"there is nothing in death nor life that can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Which is why the best way we prepare for 'going home' is by being fully present in the 'home' of NOW. The Eternal Now. Like Jesus said, **"I have come, that you may have life in all its fullness"**.



And I want to make this profound wisdom relevant and real with the story of this man. And then 2 people from our own church community.

If you don't know him, Tim Keller has been one of the most influential Christian voices of recent times. He was pastor of the Redeemer Church in New York and wrote many books that nourished many people's faith journey.

In 2020 he announced that he'd been diagnosed with stage 4 terminal cancer and began to write very honestly and movingly about how his diagnosis took him on a deeply searching spiritual journey.

He said that one of his most powerful realisations was that he hadn't **TRULY** lived out the **fullness** of his faith. It wasn't that he'd in any way been inauthentic about his faith - he just realised that he hadn't **fully experienced** the life-giving fruit that comes with an intimate union of relationship with Father, Son and Spirit.

But since his diagnosis he said this had changed. **He said that even though he was dying, he'd never felt more fully alive.** Both he and his wife prayed more - savoured and cherished each other, their family and friends more - and just experienced the beautiful essence of life by abiding in God's presence, more.

**And isn't this the wisdom that can so often eludes all of us.
How much life-giving fruit in all its many expressions do we let slip by?
How can we best realise this truth before the diagnosis?**

And here's a quote from Tim Keller expressing the fruit of this wisdom.

Grieve with hope; wake up and be at peace; in the face of death remember to laugh; and sing for joy at what's coming. If Jesus Christ has you by the hand, you can sing."

And in the beautiful way that God works, as I came across these words from Tim Keller about singing for joy - I received a phone call from our very own Rod Kestle. And I do have permission to share this story.

But a bit of context for those who won't be aware.

3 years ago, Rod was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer and given 6 months to live. As you can imagine this has been quite a roller coaster journey. But through all of it, both Rod and Penny have said how much this journey has taken them deeper in their faith. Abiding more deeply with God. And how they have a sense of peace about this.

Rod also loves music and singing - I've lost count of how many times he's come up at the end of the service and said I want that particular song for my funeral service. So, a heads up for all of us. When the Lord decides he wants Rod to 'come home'. It's going to be a pretty long service with lots of singing

Anyway, a couple of weeks back he called to tell me how much he'd loved the service and that he sung with such gusto that his lung with the tumour on it was hurting the next day.

He talked about how meaningful he found the song ... **"It's your breath in our lungs so we pour out our praise"**. For Rod, this captured his gratitude to God for the breath in his lungs and the gift of each new day And how he wants to use this breath to live life as fully as he can.

This struck me as such a beautiful and powerful metaphor for every one of us of how we can live well in the gift of each new day. How we can best prepare for our death by savouring the precious gift of life.

And only on Thursday I had a text from one of our community telling me that he and his wife hadn't come to church because he's been through a serious illness journey. It got so

life threatening that their 2 daughters flew over from England to be with them, but very pleased to say he has come through it.

He said to me ... *“you know Josh, we’re always learning aren’t we. There’s nothing like being taken to the brink to bring everything into sharp focus. This is when we truly realise what’s most important and precious.”*

As I said, isn’t the wisdom for all of us - to try and live this truth before we get to the brink.

GARLANDS STORY



I’ll leave the last word to Jesus.

As we know, Jesus experienced the full range of our human experience, including the deep pain of alienation and suffering.

But whatever his circumstance or challenge, his defining characteristic – was that nothing could shake or break His peace of **knowing** that He was anchored in an intimate, ongoing, relationship with the Father. His ultimate ‘home’ was always in this Divine union. As he said in John 10 **“I and the Father are One.”**

So how profound is it that you and I are invited into this intimate life-giving relationship? “I pray Father, that just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us.”

- So how does this truth speak to you today in your circumstances?
- Where might you sense a disconnect in your intimacy with this Divine Union?
- How might you spend time this week investing in this mutual in-dwelling relationship with Father, Son and Spirit. Spend sacred time abiding and dwelling in God’s love – in order to bear life-giving fruit? And what might this abiding and dwelling look like for you?