

THE SERMONS FROM A SERIES
ON FRUITFULNESS;

Be with Be like

EXPERIENCING AND EXHIBITING THE FATHER'S LOVE
AND CHRISTLIKE WAY BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

FOR OUR BELOVED CENTRAL VINEYARD;

MAY THESE SERMONS NOT JUST BE
WORDS TO LEARN FROM,
BUT WORDS TO LIVE BY —
THAT THEY HELP YOU BE WITH GOD,
THAT YOU MAY BE LIKE HIM.

A NOTE ON THIS EBOOK

You're holding a collection of sermons that were preached live and sent as letters.

The first three sermons were preached at our 10am Epsom Gatherings, so they are a bit longer. These are the preaching scripts Dan spoke from, minus the impromptu changes in the moment, so they read like those spoken sermons.

The remaining sermons were Sunday Epistles sent out during our Delta Outbreak lockdown. We changed our delivery form for this time and sent our sermons as letters, and these are the letters sent from our authors. The word count is a fair bit lower than the first three, and they were written to be read like letters.

We've kept them all as they were, just with some edits to grammar along the way. We hope you can appreciate the "time-and-place" nature of these records, references to how both we, and our city, navigated so many changes along the way.

08.21

ELEVEN WEEKS FROM
AUGUST 2021 TO OCTOBER 2021.

10.21

The sermons from a series on *fruitfulness*;

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AUDIO OF ALL SERMONS ARE AVAILABLE ON OUR CENTRAL VINEYARD PODCAST AT [CENTRALVINEYARD.ORG/PODCAST](https://centralvineyard.org/podcast)

PART 1
AN INTRODUCTION TO FRUITFULNESS

BY DAN SHEED

PREACHED AT 10AM
EPSOM GATHERING

Introduction

OPENING READINGS

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5 NLT

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalising everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make

sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

Galatians 5:19–26 (The Message)

WHEN I WAS A KID, I wasn't allowed to watch The Simpsons. Apparently, upon watching Bart Simpson and his display of attitude I would very similarly act up and display the same. And so, in the days of TVs that were controllable – this is pre-TV streaming, so shows were only on at certain times, and on certain channels, and if you missed it, you missed it – I was not allowed to watch the Simpsons and that meant I just didn't see it. My parents made this rule, and it was in place to create a certain outcome. “No watching that show, because we don't want you to become like that.” This played out in a bunch of things as a kid; TV shows, books, friend groups I spent time with. They were able to turn the tap on or off pretty clearly. All this to say: if I was starting to track in a certain direction of behaviour, my parents had a lot of control of being able to reign in what I was exposed to.

The other day, I heard of a parent whose six-year-old child suffered an anxiety attack one morning near the end of the last school term. Their reason for this sudden turn was they didn't want to go because she wasn't unsure if she was a boy or a girl. A six-year-old, had an anxious episode because they don't know their gender identity. In a world full of mental health conversations at the moment – think even Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, Ben Stokes this week too in the sporting arena – well, this is where this little girl's story of anxiety and mental health begins.

Now, I know there are a lot of things at play in this situation and there will be a bunch of opinions even in this room about that.

But, can we just ask for a moment; who's formed that situation for her? The little girl? Or has something else created the environment within her for that anxious moment? Who is informing her that this is a problem to be considered

anyway? What has the playground chat become? What has the messaging of society enforced?

My thoughts are that at the macro-level, the messaging of our culture, which is in a state of chaos due to the breaking down of so many agreed universal truths, has led to a six-year-old girl sitting at home crying, struggling to breathe, and anxious about going to school because she doesn't know what to think about her own body.

The parent in me thinks of what my parents did, and wonders for the sake of my own boy;

Will that be Jimmy one day very soon?

How do I stop him from being a casualty in this chaotic culture?

Can I stop him from having that same experience?

Like my parents did, how am I going to turn that channel off for him?

Can I avoid the show?

Can I avoid him seeing it all?

The answer; no.

Secular culture doesn't work that way, we can't just turn it off. Secularism is the water we are all swimming in. It's the zeitgeist of this age. It's around us every day.

My parents had the ability to control so many of the inputs in my life, almost setting up a dam that stopped the flow; but I am not sure if it is possible to build a dam big enough at the moment.

On and on comes the messaging:

“You have to be true to yourself.”

“You should be free to live however you want as long as you don’t hurt anyone.”

“You must do whatever makes you the happiest. Don’t sacrifice that for anyone.”

“The only way to solve our problems is through objective science and facts.”

“Everyone has the right to decide what is right and wrong for themselves.”

Whether it’s billboards and marketers, or Instagram follows and “post your truth”, or even our workplace environments or dinner tables with extended family or friends or whether it’s the playground at school – we can’t escape the 24–7 nature of our culture’s message onslaught. The culture we are in is a turn of chaos.

As Tim Keller puts it, in *How To Reach The West Again*, our current cultural markers are that:

“All values are relative.

All relationships are transactional.

All identities are fragile.

All (supposed) sources of fulfilment are disappointing.

And so, ironically, we are still not free.”

And the pressure of living in this cultural picture – maybe a way to say it is, abiding in it – is maybe why a six–year–old girl is bearing the fruit of a panic attack before school.

And this is where a life lived on the Way of Jesus suddenly matters. It suddenly kicks into real life. Because faith isn’t about being removed from a cultural story – it’s about being found amongst it living in another way entirely. It’s about pointing to a different reality. It’s about living towards other truths. It’s

about bearing something *different* amongst the cultural chaos.

But to do this well we must be intentional about who has our attention. Dominant culture has a way of forming us by osmosis – so much of it sub-conscious. Dominant culture also has the mob, and the mob can be hard to stand against. We have to be aware of what we are in.

It is true; what we abide in, we become like.

If we abide in our culture, because culture cannot be tamed or mastered, we too will be like that six-year-old girl. Like her, we will feel anxiety and confusion and fear and wonder how to make sense of spheres of reality. But we aren't called to abide in our culture. We are invited to abide in God, to know Him in loving union, to experience his love and faithful care to each of us, to have His reality become the garden that we are growing in, and as a result, bear his loving, faithful and steadfast nature into the world in this moment.

The biblical authors had an idea for all of this: it's called living fruitfully.

Or another way to put it: *it's living the fruit of the Spirit.*

And that's what this series ahead is all about.

When I look at what my parents were doing parenting me through those years, they were doing something very important, in the way they only knew how to for that moment. My parents were being very intentional about this rule of life; a truth that is true:

WHAT YOU ARE WITH, YOU BECOME LIKE.
WHO YOU ARE WITH, YOU BECOME LIKE.
SIMPLY PUT: BE WITH, BE LIKE.

What you are with, you become like.

Who you are with, you become like.

Simply put: Be with, be like.

So that's our new series: Be with, be like. A series exploring fruitfulness. All of this is a grunter way of talking about the biblical idea of the Fruit of the Spirit – but, we've tried to make it less about the Sunday School lesson version, and something with a bit more grit to it. So today, let's talk about this idea of "fruitfulness."

Jesus repeatedly used this metaphor. It's been in our reading today, John 15.

But he also used it in other ways: "A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad." (Matt 12:33)

Do you hear him, harking back to the imagery of the opening psalm of the Book of Psalms?

"They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.
Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do."

Saint Paul used it as well, most famously perhaps is in our second reading for today in Galatians 5:22–23.

Fruitfulness. What does this mean? What is this word picture trying to get us to see?

Well let's start right back at the biblical audience these texts were for originally. We have to do a bit of deconstruction and imagine a life that was not like ours, one that was not convenient. It was a life pre-Uber eats and drive-throughs, Google Maps, shopping malls and light switches. It was a life of agricultural living, deeply connected to life's essentials each day; farming practices, hunting and gathering.

This is an audience of fisherman and homemakers, of shepherds and water gatherers, of grain harvesters and bread bakers. They cared deeply about how the weather worked, when rain came and did not come, what different seasons produced and what it took to sustain life. The life of their crops, animals and fishing options were deeply connected their own lives.

The first-century audience listening to the teachings of Jesus, or reading the letters from Paul were people whose lives were far more closely connected to what they ate and how they grew it than a lot of us.

Their days were spent at the coalface of life's essentials – whether that was keeping the fire going to cook with, or daily collecting water, or fishing for the family and community, or tending to a flock of sheep or growing plants for food to eat. There wasn't much time off from this activity. If it was neglected for too long, they went hungry as a result. Even those in cities were still connected to the agricultural sector since cities were dependant on local farming and in the infant stages of creating marketplaces and trade routes. It was nothing compared to our lives today where food moves quickly all over the world, easily available but so detached from its source. This was a time where what was made locally was eaten locally.

So, Jesus and the other Biblical authors take this close agricultural connection the audience had and use it as a word picture – a metaphor – and with this picture get the imaginations of their audience seeing truths quickly. They do this with all sorts of things;

A quick example: David famously said: The LORD is my shepherd in his psalm, and Jesus took that and said, “I am the good shepherd...” This audience would hear that idea and immediately connect the dots richly in their imagination of what a shepherd does and does not do, what they are busy doing and what they care about. Everyone knew shepherds, they all depended on them.

Here, in our metaphor for this series, as we have heard in our opening readings, we are looking at the word picture of fruitfulness. A plant that bears fruit.

The audience hearing this would have been deeply connected in daily life to the work it took to get a plant to bear fruit. For a lot of us, we aren't.

Blame it on the changing nature of our lives – most of us simply buy fruit from a grocery store or a bottle of wine for a dinner without even considering the organic and even miraculous system where it has come from anymore – have you recently eaten an apple or drunk a glass wine and stopped to think mid-chew or mid glass to consider the soil conditions and years of water and sun, and balance of good nutrients and the seasons being kind that went into that mouthful?

Maybe partly to blame is not just our convenience but our geography; this isn't exactly rural Aotearoa! Most of us aren't surrounded by orchards of trees and paddocks of sheep and beef or grain. Sure, most of us might have a lemon tree

in the back yard or an apple tree over a fence on our street, but our whole life isn't orientated around working an agricultural life.

All this to say, for a lot of us, we read powerful metaphors in the scriptures and miss the powerful part. We move on as they aren't richly applicable like the author may have assumed they would be to the original audience.

So, today I want to start by just allowing the metaphor to breathe a little. What does this picture start to show us?

Well, this picture is about a system of life source – the vine and the branches and the fruit are all connected to each other. They are sustained and dependant by connection. This picture is about a connection that creates a production; all of the system being at rights and as it should be makes something good. This picture is about something that is produced for something other than the tree itself. All of this takes time. Fruit is not made, it grows. And to grow well it takes care (watering etc) and pruning (removal of unhelpful growth). Finally, the planting is in hope of bearing fruit which gives it a future orientation.

So the metaphor of fruitfulness tells us;

The Christian life has a life source to God, it is not done disconnected and isolated; the Christian life has a productive nature to it which is true to the original and good Way; the Christian life is a life lived beyond oneself of service into the world for others.

This growth work is from our slow and constant abiding, not our striving.

The work of fruitfulness also requires being pruned and God caringly correcting us.

The work of abiding is eschatological; it's hoping in the future to come.

FRUITFULNESS IS:
EXPERIENCING AND EXHIBITING THE
FATHER'S LOVE AND CHRISTLIKE WAY
BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

All of this is a combination of experiencing God and then exhibiting that experience of God. It's about all of Trinity: the Father's love, the Christ-modelled way of life and the empowerment and work of the Holy Spirit.

So, all of this can be condensed down into a working definition: *Fruitfulness is: experiencing and exhibiting the Father's love and Christlike Way by the Holy Spirit.*

Experiencing and exhibiting. Being with, becoming like.

As William Blake said, "You become like what you behold."

And this use of the word "like" is not to be a mere imitation—copy, but actually a creation made of the same nature.

J. Lancaster says "...the Christian is called, not merely to resemble Christ, but to share His very life. One might be bold enough to suggest that "Christness" would be nearer the mark since the believer is more than a copy of Christ; they are part and parcel of His very being, "bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh," as Paul daringly puts it in Ephesians 5:30.

Our likeness to Christ is therefore not something applied from without—a cosmetic transformation produced by the formulae of some religious make-up department—but a genuine likeness produced by an intimate relationship with Him. Christ's own analogy of the vine and the branches upholds this (John 15). The branches are not merely "vine-like," they are part of the vine; likewise the fruit does not merely resemble grapes, but possesses their inherent structure and taste."

Or what about this from Gordon Fee – probably the best theological voice on things of the Holy Spirit:

“We have been invaded by the living God himself, in the person of his Spirit, whose goal is to infect us thoroughly with God’s own likeness. Paul’s phrase for this infection is the fruit of the Spirit. The coming of the Spirit, with the renewing of our minds, gives us a heavenly appetite for this fruit. The growing of this fruit is the long way on the way of Christian conversion, the “long obedience in the same direction,” and it is altogether the work of the Spirit in our lives.”

Note, Fee refers here to “the Fruit of the Spirit.” Let’s shift into that, as that was our second reading for today.

The reading today came from Galatians, and so a quick Galatians overview might be helpful.

It is a letter addressing a problem and the problem is the Jewish law and what the new believers from outside of that tribe should do with it. Must they conform to all the details of the law, such as males being circumcised? Or is there now a new way of being the people of God?

This is a book painting the picture of the new rule of freedom; life in the love of the Father, the Christlike Way and the work of the Holy Spirit. It doesn’t mean anything goes – there is a vision in here of the right life, one that isn’t controlled by sin and all that comes with that, but one that is living reproducing the nature of God into the world. And the way it is put in Galatians 5 is to reuse the metaphor we have been talking about all day; it is a life of a

certain looking way, of a certain type of fruit; the fruit of Love, expressed in 8 characteristic ways;

Love

Joy

Peace

Patience

Kindness

Goodness

Faithfulness

Gentleness

Self control

Interestingly, this list from Paul sounds very similar to his list in 1 Corinthians 13 on what love is. It's also hitting similar themes to the Sermon on the Mount which Jesus taught as the Way of the Kingdom.

This list is the Christlike Way lived in the world.

It's a list of the Father's Love enacted into the human story.

It's a list of how things will be when all things are made new by God, the one doing that work in His creation.

It's a list that makes a portrait of what the Christian life should look like in real life.

It's a brave list.

Some things on this list are counter-cultural to the behaviours of our culture, and some things on this are defined in completely different ways to the way our culture would define them.

We need to leave the container of the metaphor now and let this idea sit here as real life.

What does the fruit of the Spirit actually look like for us this afternoon, or later in the week, or in times of pressure?

Well, theologians identify them as graced character traits. They become markers of virtue. They become behaviours of goodness. God grows in us these new ways of being as signposts to His Kingdom and Way. Great Christian Saints are great because they have displayed these things.

Samuel Chadwick unpacks it like this: “In newspaper English, the passage would read something like this: The Fruit of the Spirit is an affectionate, loveable disposition, a radiant spirit and a cheerful temper, a tranquil mind and a quiet manner, a fore-bearing patience in provoking circumstances and with trying people, a sympathetic insight and tactful helpfulness, generous judgment and a big-souled charity, loyalty and reliableness under all circumstances, humility that forgets self in the joy of others, in all things self-mastered and self-controlled, which is the final mark of perfecting.”

Or from one of the commentaries I have been reading for this series:

“All these other virtues which are mentioned are but facets of love. When the Spirit of God comes into one’s life, He invariably sheds abroad His Love in the heart. In *Notes From My Bible*, by D.L. Moody, this characterisation of love is found in terms of all these other virtues, as follows:

“Joy is love exulting.

WE NEED TO DEFINE SUCCESS AS
FRUITFULNESS

Peace is love reposing.
Long-suffering is love untiring.
Meekness is love under discipline.
Goodness is love in action.
Faith is love on the battlefield
Gentleness is love enduring.
Temperance is love in training.”

As you can see, the metaphor is gone now and this idea is actually tactile and real: The fruit of the Spirit is the living of Christian love.

The world needs more people whose lives are marked by these virtues. The church needs people who look like this. We need people who look like this. That six-year-old girl who had an anxiety attack needs more people in her life who look like this.

Our secular culture is not marked by these things – some of them, yes, but not all of them together as the unified portrait of a life of love lived into the world. And I know that the Church hasn't been great at displaying them all either. I know *I* haven't been. And I'm kindly and graciously assuming that you have had your challenges too...

But I think it's time we changed that story. We need to define success as fruitfulness. We need to put way more focus on this as being important. In a faith that is often categorised by whether we went to church, or didn't, or whether we believe this or believe that, or agree with this, or not that, we need to recover this fundamental of Orthodox Christian Faith: the life on the Way of Jesus is meant to be a life living out the fullness of love.

As Jesus says at the end of John 15:17, “But remember the root command: Love one another.”

When we talk about fruitfulness, we are talking about our real life lived in this time and place and culture. We are talking about being connected intentionally to another source; God – who Himself is this nature of love. We are talking about that connection bearing God’s nature to our world as the Christlike Way. And it can only be done by the work of the Spirit in us.

To finish, a closing pastoral thought on all of this.

I want to highlight one core truth from today: *fruit is grown, not made*. Abiding means slowing down and stopping. Growth takes time. Bearing is not fast and convenient.

I want to close from Samuel Chadwick again, I sense this is where to leave things today.

“Works belong to the workshop; fruit belongs to the garden. One comes from the ingenuity of the factory; the other is the silent growth of abounding life. The factory operates with dead stuff; the garden cultivates living forces to their appointed end. Works are always in the realm of dead things. Every building is built out of dead material. The tree must die before it can be of use to the builder. There is no life in stones and brick, in steel joists and iron girders. They are all dead and in the process of disintegration. Nothing material lasts. Mankind’s best works fail and fade, crumble and pass away ... Fruit does not come of a person’s labour. It requires their diligence, but it is neither their invention nor their product. When man has done all he can, then God begins

and life proceeds. Fruit is God's work. The phrase "fruit of the Spirit" assigns the graces of the Christian character to their proper source. They are not of man's producing."

So, may we all go with God and may God graciously grow in us what needs to be produced.

BY DAN SHEED

PREACHED AT 10AM
EPSOM GATHERING

8/8/21

Love

OPENING READING

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other.

John 15:1–17 NLT

JESUS HERE IS CREATING A WONDERFUL PICTURE; abide in love – live in love, remain in love – but not just any love though, the love of the Father, and in doing so, you yourself will be loved and learn how to bear that love to the world.

But – what do we mean we say: “love”?

What is coming to mind when I say that word right now for you?

We love certain foods.

We love the way an outfit looks on a friend.

We love a new band’s album.

We watch shows on TV of strangers being put together to find love; whether in a setup marriage, or on an island with other competitors – the constant theme is “I’m trying to find love.”

Some of us are in love with someone.

Some of us have been, but it seems to have gone.

Some of us want to be, desperately.

We use love as a synonym to be kind to someone.

We use love as a posture to say “I don’t agree with you, but I accept you anyway.”

Or, the other side of this; those who want to be accepted and don’t feel that acceptance come to the conclusion, “you don’t love me.”

Sometimes sex is just sex, and other times sex is love-making.

A parent loves their child and so they do anything they possibly can practically do to raise them in the knowledge of this love.

They provide for every need.

They work extra hours.

They lose sleep.

They give up their own dreams.

They lose a part of themselves, all because of love.

We all want to be loved.

We all want to be in love.

In the words of the Beatles; “all we need is love.”

But what love?

Let’s put this all into a bit of a spectrum to consider –

When we’re talking about love, we’re talking about all of this:

A low–bar definition of love: an appreciation of something (I love Electric Chicken’s cheeseburgers or I love what you have done with your hair or right up to, I love this city or I love how that person looks...)

A mid–range definition of love: a transaction of acceptance or validation (“Although I don’t agree with you, I love you and accept you as you are” or even “I love you because you make me feel good”

A better definition of love: a passion towards another, a feeling of deep affection (“I love you so much that I would do anything to have you”)

A greater definition of love: the active giving of oneself (I love you so much I have given everything for you...I am dying to myself for you.)

A biblical definition of love: God incarnate is the self–revealing nature of a self–giving God who is love.

Hold on for a moment while I flesh that out and make a quick case here for that last one and for the sake of time, I'm just going to stick to one Biblical author; John – where our reading for today comes from. John is the one who makes the proposition “God is love” in His first letter, 1 John 4:8 and 16, but the truth it expresses runs through the Gospels.

Firstly, it's implied in the address of Jesus to God as “Father,” which brings with it the intimate language of family, with all its overtones of love and care and intimacy, into our understanding of the deity.

Secondly, it's shown through God's actions. John 3:16; God loved the world and loved it so much that he sent his Son. Or in John 15; God first loved us – this is action love, not just acceptance love. He moved towards humankind first. “The Father loves the Son” (Jn 3:35) Jesus takes the Father's love for him as foundational and reasons from it.

“Just as the Father has loved me, I also have loved you”, he said in John 15:9, before defining that love further in John 10:17, “for this reason the Father loves me, that I lay down my life”.

Notice how high the standard of love is here. It's not just validation, or compassion – though we do find those in the life of Jesus – it's that top-shelf definition. *Actively giving oneself.*

There is a similar appeal to the love of the Father as foundational in the great prayer in the upper room on the eve of the crucifixion when Jesus prays, “that the world may know that you sent me, and have loved me as I have loved them” in John 17.

As I have loved you; this language implies that it is meant to be done demonstratively. We too are to be in the Father's love, and demonstrate it. This self-giving God reveals love clearest of all on the cross. Here is Biblical love: God himself, fully self-submitted has entered into the violent and corrupt power systems of the day. He didn't over-power them by force or might, or by a miraculous side-step, but in love as the bloody, and beaten servant acting on the behalf of all, first.

As the hymn, *Here is love* (which we sang today) puts it in the second verse:

*On the mount of crucifixion
fountains opened deep and wide;
through the floodgates of God's mercy
flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Gracious love, like mighty rivers,
poured incessant from above,
and heaven's peace and perfect justice
kissed a guilty world in love.*

All of this is done within the summary of: love.

Brad Jersak in his book *A More Christlike God* says: "God is love plus nothing."

His love is not divided equally to other attributes; such as God is love, but He is also wrath for example. No, Jersak says, God's love is not found alongside other attributes, but it has other attributes: God's love is beauty, truth, holy, justice, righteousness, patience... Love as a whole defines the attributes of God. It is like a diamond; a diamond is a diamond in essence, but it has facets. Love is

the diamond as a whole, the essence, and the facets are the attributes.

And it's the boundaries of these facets that will always be the boundaries that God's love goes beyond. As in, it can't be contained to just one or two of them. Maybe this is why in Ephesians 3, Paul prays a prayer of the boundless love of God; it goes beyond the horizons we can set up to glimpse it in.

This is sketched out beautifully in another hymn, *The Love of God*. Here is the third verse:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made
Were every stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky*

To translate; if the ocean was ink, if the sky was our canvas, and if every person on earth could write with that ink on that canvas, we would not be able to contain writing of the love of God. This is the expansive love of God.

So, let's go back to where we started:

God's love is not just how much appreciation he has of you – though that's in there too. God's love is not just an acceptance of you as you are or validation of you as you are – though that's in there too.

Those are actually very shallow ideas of God's love.

God's love is His very essence of being; God is so deeply affectionate towards you, he has acted first in the most generous self-revealing way – beyond borders of just one idea whether justice, or holiness, or patience or whatever! – to demonstrate and make himself One with you graciously and compassionately.

Maybe, the best way to sum this up is in the words of the Psalmist who often quote this phrase;

“The LORD is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.”

This is straight out of Exodus 34:6 where YAHWEH says to Moses who He is as he passes by;

“YAHWEH! The LORD!
The God of compassion and mercy!
I am slow to anger
and *filled* with unfailing love and faithfulness.”

All that to say today; *the essence of God is faithful love.*

So, if that's God's revealed nature of love to us all, then how do we connect into that?

Well, this is where Jesus' metaphor idea of “abiding in love” is crucial because

ABIDING IS ALL ABOUT CONNECTION.

to respond to love is to do exactly that; abide in it. *Abiding is all about connection.* It's not totally passive, there is work to it – because to learn to be connected takes a work of itself. But when we get those connections just right, the work of abiding is done and the abiding work can then be done in us.

So, we must practice abiding by simply thinking of it like this: practice connection.

Work on making spaces that help you to receive the Love that has already been given. For the Orthodox Christian faith of 2000 years, this has meant engaging in practices that help make connection a constant state. Practices like prayer, worship, fasting, Bible reading, sabbath, silence and solitude. None of these practices are the end goal but rather the means to abide in love.

Let's take the practice of prayer for example.

Jesus teaches us to begin prayer with “Our Father...” Of all the opening addresses Jesus could have told us to do, this is what He said. Pray, “Our *Father.*” Think back for a second to earlier in this talk; Jesus was in the love of His Father. He is now telling us to do the same thing.

The Aramaic word here is Abba and it's a term of affection. Of love. Of one who is in the gaze of their beloved. This is a word of intimacy.

If God isn't Abba to us, then God is still a theory. If God isn't Abba to us, then God must be something else – like an angry rule-keeping authoritarian. Jesus is saying, I want you all to be able to come to God and know him as Abba. That is how prayer should start; waking up to knowing God is loving you.

TO ABIDE IS THE WORK OF
CONNECTION THAT GOD MAY SAY
TO YOU, "I LOVE YOU."

Ronald Rolheiser says, “You must try to pray so that, in your prayer, you open yourself in such a way that sometime—perhaps not today, but sometime—you are able to hear God say to you, “I love you!” These words, addressed to you by God, are the most important words you will ever hear because, before you hear them, nothing is ever completely right with you, but after you hear them, something will be right in your life at a very deep level.”

And on we could go with those other practices; the means of which is to hear God say, “I love you.” Bible reading, where we encounter the story of this God of love revealed to us. Or sung worship, where we encounter the message of this God of love in our songs as words and emotional movement. Or even silence and solitude, where we can encounter God’s love not by striving or putting on a show, but by simply listening with our whole beings for the mystical experience of God’s encounter of his posture towards us.

So just to be clear; to abide is the work of connection that God may say to you, “I love you.” And then, with that as our input, we then have an output; what we abide in we become like, we too can be this way of love to the world.

As we have already explored earlier, culturally, “love” is being used as a word to say so many things,

“I appreciate you” or...

“I accept you” or...

“I’m really really hot for you” or...

“Be kind”...

So if we are to bear love, then are these all good enough? What are we bearing? Well to form our answer, let me ask this rhetorical question;

Is there nine fruit of the Spirit, or one?

Last week we saw the list of the fruit of the Spirit. But that list sounds very familiar to something else.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul uses the same scaffolding in his great portrait of love. “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”

Can you see the fruit of the Spirit list in there? Patience. Kindness. The next couple of ideas can be chalked up as gentleness. The next would be able to define being a person of peace. There are actions of goodness in there. Self-control and faithfulness are in that last line. Maybe we could say the only one missing explicitly is joy?

And all of those are defining something for Paul: *this is what love is*. These are the facets of love lived.

Or as we saw last week, D.L. Moody shared the same idea – with some different adjectives.

“Joy is love exulting.

Peace is love reposing.

Longsuffering is love untiring.

Meekness is love under discipline.

Goodness is love in action.
Faith is love on the battlefield
Gentleness is love enduring.
Temperance is love in training.”

If God is love plus nothing, then can we too live out this holistic version of love?

To answer this, I want to come out of lists and lofty thought and ground this right here in our everyday life. The stuff of our everyday. Maybe, it's helpful to look at a picture of the antithesis of this for a moment from Pete Scazzero. Here's what Pete posted recently to Instagram:

You know you're not experiencing loving union with Jesus when you...
Can't shake the pressure you feel from having too much to do in too little time
Are always rushing
Routinely fire off quick opinions and judgements
Are often fearful about the future
Are often overly concerned with what others think
Are defensive and easily offended
Are routinely preoccupied and distracted
Consistently ignore the stress, anxiety and tightness of your body
Feel unenthusiastic or threatened by the success of others
Routinely spend more time talking than listening

Let's turn Pete's negative phrases into positive ones...

You know you are living in loving union with Jesus when:
You are internally steady.

You are not hurried.

You are slow to speak.

You are hopeful.

You know your identity in God.

You can take feedback as a gift.

You are present to the moment.

Your body is at ease, and if not, you know what to do.

You celebrate others.

You listen.

Love is a life lived in the fullness of fruitfulness; the ability to forever pursue life towards the other in everyday ways. Pete makes it all seem pretty straightforward really.

Saint Theresa of Calcutta famously said: “There are no great things, only small things with great love. Happy are those.”

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who other Theresa took her name from, and inspired her, said:

“Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love.”

These Saints are the portraits of two people who experienced the love of God and lived it richly. Inspiring lives of faith and service. And these great Saints of the church, who have faithfully done incredible things, are telling us their secret: it's not about big things, it's about all the small things always done in love. These Saints lived a simple idea: live amazed by God's love and live God's

love amazingly into the world.

But here's the even more amazing thing; *there is a saint in all of us.*

Me. You. There's a saint in all of us waiting to be formed more fully into this life of love. We are called 'saints' by God – through Christ He sees us as holy and set apart – and we are called to walk in the calling of love lived. To mature in that love.

We are to richly experience the great love of God...

...and...

...we are to love greatly *with* God.

That's the saint's life in all of us.

So may you be with God, this God who is love, and may your love be like that love.

THERE'S A SAINT IN ALL OF US.

BY DAN SHEED

PREACHED AT 10AM
EPSOM GATHERING.

15/8/21

Joy

OPENING READING

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety–nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety–nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbours and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home

to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

Luke 15 NLT

THESE THREE PARABLES WE HAVE JUST HEARD are stories Jesus is using as a device to get us to imagine something. He wants us as an audience to understand a spiritual truth by using the reality of everyday things from life – a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son – all being found.

Here's a truth sitting in the text today; *God rejoices when lost things are found, and to rejoice, God celebrates accordingly.* We could sum this up as; God's love is joyful.

Today is part three of our series and we're looking at the fruit of joy. Joy (Gr. chara) is our next fruit of the spirit in the Galatians 5 list we are working through; it's a prominent facet of love and a defining characteristic of the Christian life. Over four hundred references to joy pervading both testaments of the Scriptures – joy is mentioned some 80 times in the Psalms alone, and 40 times in the gospels around Jesus. It is the root word of the important action words rejoice and enjoy.

In our secular culture, "Joy" is all over motivational posters and Instagram posts, it is used by marketers to sell us a black carbonated liquid; "Enjoy Coca-Cola", or their more recent adaption, "Open happiness."

Marie Condo recently had the world cleaning out cupboards and wardrobes asking if our belongings 'sparked joy' in us (if it did, you kept it, if it didn't you moved it on).

In the brilliant kids movie *Inside Out*, we follow Riley and the five main emotions of humanity within her as she goes through some big life changes like moving to San Fransisco. Of the five emotions – joy, fear, anger, disgust

and sadness – joy (voiced by Amy Poehler) is portrayed inside Riley as the emotion that has been the best so far in life, joy is better and the most desirable emotion, until sadness started to become more dominant in this disturbing time of change. The movie brilliantly follows how joy and sadness can actually come together and instead of being at odds, bring some counterbalance.

Personality-wise, if you're an upbeat optimistic and energetic person, you might struggle to see why others don't always share your enthusiasm for a joyful disposition to life like you do – to use the *Inside Out* idea; joy might have the run of things in you... If you're more subdued and melancholic, maybe someone where sadness has more of the default run of the house, you've probably already regretted coming to church today and are hoping for this talk on joy to end quickly.

So what is joy?

It is curiously quite challenging to define what joy is. But here are some definitions to put on the table today:

joy is a buoyant sense of well-being,
an intense satisfaction,
and an exultant delight.

It naturally expresses itself in laughter, song, gratitude, large-heartedness, and generosity.

And it is highly desirable.

We spend a lot of energy and effort trying to find it, and once found, to try and live in it.

In 1955 C.S Lewis wrote *Surprised by Joy*. In it, Lewis called joy an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” He labels this desire “joy” and says that it “must be sharply distinguished both from happiness and from pleasure”. In this terrific work, he defines joy as the phenomenon of longing and mentions how in response to this longing he has “been struck with stabs of joy” throughout his life.

Hence, the surprise of it (the title). We don’t make joy, it comes from outside of us and our own happiness or pleasure, and it arrives to us as a gift. We can desire it to happen to us, but most of the time we can’t make it happen. And sometimes it sneaks up and gets us when we least expect it to. It just, well, arrives.

And on those arrivals...

Joy can be experienced in response to a wide range of positive life events—the birth of a child, a wedding, a successful harvest, finding a job, or scoring a winning point.

In our reading today, in those parables, God’s joy arrived in the finding of a lost thing. God’s joy was evident by the activity of return and redemption. The finding of the lost sheep likened to our own return to God as our shepherd causes rejoicing; the woman rejoicing over finding the lost coin – we are of value to God which causes rejoicing; the Father’s joy rejoiced because the lost son walked home. He wasn’t joyful before that, but when the surprise of seeing the lost son filled his gaze, he suddenly was.

So, this might sound preposterous; but even Heaven seems to be surprised

by joy, it breaks out when God's loving longings are fulfilled – when we arrive back to him – when we return to Him and things are made as they should be. Ephesians 1 puts it this way too; that God's mysterious plan was fulfilled that it may bring him pleasure and joy – when we return to how we were always meant to be – people in love and union with Him, His love for us means that his first response is to rejoice and celebrate.

But, joy is more than just the arrival of something – it can also become a disposition.

Our Christian tradition locates the ultimate source of life is in God's love, so joy is in God eternal and God's desire is for his creatures to experience this joy themselves.

As the Psalmist says in Psalm 16:11:

“You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence
and the pleasures of living with you forever.”

Listen to how immersive the Psalmist is here about joy – this is so much more than just a response to an event or arrival; this is a desire to live in this kind of way always and eternal.

Last week we covered how “God is love plus nothing” remember; so *God's love is joyful love*. It is His posture towards creation, and us, that is a love that is (to use our definitions from earlier) this buoyant sense of well-being, an intense satisfaction,

and an exultant delight
always.

God's disposition to you is joy.

So, for us, for it to become a disposition, what does it take? It takes cultivation.

When it has truly been cultivated, it is a more sustained disposition in response to longer-term circumstances – instead of just the moment of the wedding, it's joy in the gift of a good marriage, or instead of just the acceptance of getting the good job, it's joy in a meaningful career, or even – it's joy in enduring the trial of hardship in a paradoxical nature... More on that soon.

We have been reading from John 15 the previous two weeks, and in that scripture, Jesus expressed his goal that his joy might be in his disciples and that their joy might then be “complete” (John 15:11).

Jesus' reference to “his joy” is a reminder that Christian joy is not merely a Christian's own response to positive or promising circumstances, it is also an expression of the supernatural life of God within. Or in other words, it's a characteristic and exhibition of the Spirit's nature and presence in us.

If we abide in love,
we will find ourselves receiving love,
and a Spirit-grown fruit of that will be joy.

So then how do we cultivate it? Is it possible to wrangle joy in some way?
Well if joy is the fruit, then like all fruit, there is some work in the gardening;

GOD'S DISPOSITION TO YOU IS JOY

and the work for joy is to practice gratitude.

When we practice gratitude; we stop and ask repeatedly what we are grateful for and why that is and how that happened and where it came from. To practice gratitude is to examine your life often – daily even – and look for what has sparked joy, both the joys that were obvious and the ones that were subtle. This is the gardening work of cultivating joy in our lives.

The Christian practice of this is simply called “the prayer of examen” – it’s an Ignatian spiritual practice where daily you stop and review your day in prayer with God, and one of the reviews you ask is: *where did I encounter joy today?* and then, you return that joy to God and thank Him for it.

And in cultivating that joy, in wrangling it from just being something that happens to us, to something we start to become ourselves as a disposition, a significant byproduct of joy is that it gives buoyancy to the human spirit – it is resilient. Many of us will know the words of the prophet Nehemiah who famously observed, “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). It’s important to note; this verse isn’t speaking of conjuring up joy – it’s about joy producing a resilient strength in us. That’s because what we are joyful for we fight harder to maintain.

I love my son, he is my joy – so I will do anything for him.

I love my wife, she is my joy, so I will do anything for her.

I love this church, it is my joy, so I do anything for it.

I love my God, he is my joy – so I will do anything for him.

For you, it might be I love making music, or I love creation and the earth, or I love serving people with care...

IF JOY IS THE FRUIT, THEN LIKE
ALL FRUIT, THERE IS SOME WORK
IN THE GARDENING; AND THE WORK
FOR JOY IS TO PRACTICE GRATITUDE.

What we are joyful for, we respond with courage and conviction. We are not easily swayed. But again – note – this is what joy creates in us (this resilience) not just a cheap bit of advice to “come on, be joyful” as it is sadly often how it’s handed out as. It’s actually a courageous call to resilience.

This brings me to perhaps the trickiest part of handling joy. A point alluded to already by referencing the movie *Inside Out*; how does joy exist in tough times? What do we do when we are in situations of suffering? How can joy possibly exist in a world ravaged by the headlines ours currently has; whether Covid–19 or the Climate Crisis? Or even in our personal lives where we live with unmet expectations or addictions that overpower us or an absence of the good life?

Well, this is where joy enters into a paradox – in fact, Christian joy is a paradox.

Why would we have joy in a faith that is centred upon a dead man beaten and bloody hanging on a cross? Why would we “rejoice” when we are persecuted, or as the early Christians were, literally thrown in jail or beaten or vilified. Why would we “enjoy” the living out of this faith that is so misunderstood in culture as being hypocritical or just a bunch of outdated rules, or even most preposterously– a faith that emphasises that to be happy you have to lose oneself? Isn’t the idea of joy in our culture is to be a fulfilled person, so why should we have to lose ourselves to find enjoyment?!

That’s where the paradox of joy comes to us in the answer of hope. We are most joyful when we receive what we have hoped for. Joy and hope are tied together. What we hope for – what we long for – is what we will be most joyful for when it happens.

Think of those of you who are saving for a house at the moment...

Or those of us trying to have children...

Or those waiting for Covid to be dealt with enough so we can get our passports out again...

We know – from others who have experienced that, or from enough tastes of our own in other areas – that on that day we will experience joy.

And that is where Christian hope becomes our joyful paradox. We know the ending of our story because we have already seen the start of it in Jesus. Jesus Christ did not enter the world to just die on a cross; He entered it to proclaim the Kingdom of God has come and burst into the broken and cracked creation we occupy. He started the healing and restoring work. He began redeeming and putting things to rights. And He promised that this is what he was going to complete in the future.

We live torn in the now and not yet nature of this.

We are those living in between.

We are those who hope.

And that hope is ours to receive now.

In his book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* Tim Keller draws on this joyful hope by saying, “While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”

Christian joy is focused on the end ahead and gets its “lift” from what God has promised—it is, in other words, “rejoicing in hope” (Rom. 12:12). Such joy comes from the Spirit who is at work now in us as the church, bringing about this alignment to God’s future within us in order to experience it fully.

When all things are made new, it will be gloriously wonderful. We can take joy in that.

The people of God have always had this future-oriented posture; the Psalms are full of it. Whether it was David hoping Saul would stop hunting him and let him be free, or Israel in Babylon hoping to one day be back in their land... the same hoping turns them to being rejoicing people.

And that's why the Scriptures reiterate the imperative, "Rejoice!" – it's not a hollow command, or a bit of "let's pump this up!" No, it's a call to embody hope. And part of the power of corporate praise times is how they can compel us out of our cynicism or our circumstances. To rejoice is to be reminded; this story I am in right now is not the only story, it's one of them – but not the only one.

And I want to be very clear here on this: all of this doesn't mean we deny our current stories of grief and lament; nowhere does the Psalms do that, in fact they honour lament by stating it, but it means we lament to hope. We become people who can still paradoxically rejoice.

Which brings me to wanting to speak a little into the half an hour of singing we do every week.

Every Sunday we gather and sing – not as some form of Christian karaoke, or as a warm up to the rest of our gathering – but as a way of embodying our hope.

We do this with worship leaders and bands and music with song lyrics. Our worship leaders are people who have taken a call to priestly life seriously, a life of leading us together, a life of standing in a special gap between us and God. They prayerfully and carefully consider each time they are on what words we

WHEN ALL THINGS ARE MADE NEW,
IT WILL BE GLORIOUSLY WONDERFUL.
WE CAN TAKE JOY IN THAT.

need to sing together to be in union with God and to let a message of hope arise in our midst. Along with the band, they curate and choose how to play those songs – do we do it upbeat, or down? Do we have lots of energy here, or should it be a mellow, easier entry point for our people?... What musicians will play this week and what does that give us as options for arrangements?

This is the careful work our worship leaders and teams do every week – and we are so grateful for that. To our worship leaders and to our musicians and creatives, thank you for being priestly for us all.

Now, as they go about that work:

Sometimes, things can feel a bit down.

Sometimes, they can feel up.

Often, it is a dynamic mix of both.

Sometimes, it's down because we need to lament and lament legitimately.

Sometimes, it's up because we want to celebrate and rejoice.

Often it's just somewhere in the middle mixing in the middle space of normal life.

As a community we always want to live with great awareness of this dynamic and to be able to empathise and switch gears; to weep with those who are weeping, and to rejoice with those who are full of joy.

But it's the idea of swinging the pendulum to the side that our worship and praise should be something of rejoicing that I want to speak to for a few moments; I want to help us look at this well as a people together. For those who love it, and for those of you who come late on purpose to avoid it...

What I want to propose is this; Joy isn't a certain tempo, but *it is* a posture of expression – and around the world, cultural formation and context provides a lot of how people groups act in expressing joy in worship.

For example; when I think of the most joyous expressions of the world I don't think of the middle-class white, stoic, and keep-it-together Anglo-Saxon English people groups of the world... I think of our African brothers and sisters, or perhaps South American, or even closer to home, I would say our Pacifica neighbours. Culturally, these people groups express themselves in much more expressive forms. I'm not saying there is more or less joy in all these cultures, but there's a difference in the *expression* of that joy. If we think of festivals for example; think of the vibrant and colourful festivals of India or Brazil. Or music; think of the drums, dancing and rhythms of Pacifica nations.

This isn't a dig at who's better or anything like that, I'm just merely observing the cultural context this all sits in.

Now, think of our cultural context for a moment. Think of our mainstream radio or the hits being played at the moment or the way most gigs are run and who's playing. For me, the things I most see are bands or electronic pop-rock. Acts like; Bands like The Beths (who are one of my favourites of this list) or Avalanche City or L.A.B or Six-60 or Lorde or Stan Walker or TEEKS or Bennie... these acts are the sound of popular music around NZ right now.

This to me is just an observation, but because we take our worship styles from what we sit in as our cultural contexts, I think it then rolls into what we "like" worship to feel like on Sunday. We walk in and like our church's worship expressions to sit in this kind of musical moment of history and here in this

place of the world; like the pop music around us, we want it not too fast, not too slow, just right. It's a music form and style that we feel culturally comfortable in.

But sometimes here in church, it doesn't fit, because the words call us beyond that comfortable feeling and form.

For example, we sing phrases like "Praise the Lord, O my soul, with all my being..."

And for so many of us – myself included and by no fault of our own – the best we can imagine this looking like is lifting our hands, maybe clapping or getting the Indie-singer twitchy-knee going. Some of us might dance. Most of us wouldn't.

I'm not saying you shouldn't, I'm saying, we just don't. Some of us wish there was a bar serving some beers so we could maybe lubricate and not care so much about ourselves. Maybe it's because the lights are on and we can all see each other. Some of us just find it all awkward and wish we'd move on to the next song. Right?!

What I'm just saying is; the "with all I have" part that is in the lyric calls us to move beyond our normal inhibitions. The lyric is drawing us out of the form, but the form keeps most of us right where we are or able or entrenched.

Or what about when the form takes on a bit of joyful life beyond what we're used to? When we sing that new song "Yahweh" – the gospel one which has a bit of groove and funk and gospel-vibe to it; it has a form that is an

expression to draw us out of the containers of our culture. Or what about when the drummer and band actually take the tempo up and try to move us into something that, as an expression, is up and over how we might have felt like walking in today. We want music that is slower and gentler to match the melancholy or introspection, and they want to turn up the tempo and energy for a bit first.

Well, some of you might be completely fine with it. God bless you! That's wonderful! Some of you though, if you are like me, sometimes you might find yourself in a dialogue in your head that goes something like; "I am NOT feeling this today! Oh please! Let's get through this so we can get to the songs that don't make me have to do this! The songs that are back in that middle ground midrange..."

Oh, if you could see inside my head sometimes...
Inside my head is a whole lot of discomfort.

Discomfort of the form of joy colliding with my joy-sapped internal world.
Discomfort that to turn the energy up looks like manipulation.
Discomfort that I'm not *there*, as in, where that song calls me to be.
Discomfort that I don't want to stand out.

And that's what can be uncomfortable about joy expressions in cultures and communities; they go beyond our culturally informed ways and even how we are finding life individually at the moment. That's the confrontation of joy.

What do we do when we are just not feeling it? Well maybe this might all be best explained in a parable of sorts.

Imagine Covid is gone, and you can travel, so you buy a plane ticket and decide to travel to Brazil.

And imagine you were late to the airport because of traffic and you arrive stressed out. And the person on the kiosk wasn't very helpful. And you have the worst flight because you end up in a seat that doesn't have a working entertainment unit. And a few hours in you end up suffering from air sickness. And you don't sleep a wink because there's a couple of kids not coping with the flight very well and letting everyone know about it... And when you land your luggage has been lost, and you ended up dragging yourself to your accommodation which ends up being some rubbish hostel, you have no belongings and try your best to get at least a few hours of sleep. In summary; a whole heap of crappy circumstances beyond your control came and got you well and truly.

And then...

...imagine after a few hours you wake up the next morning to the sound of trumpets and drums, voices and whistles. And you look outside to see a parade coming down the street and beginning to file past your window. People are coming from everywhere and flocking to the street, to take in this sight of colour and energy. You head outside and stand on the edge and you watch as dancers and musicians and floats go past for the next half an hour. Children are running alongside beaming with glee. Locals are standing next to you hooting and cheering and singing along and taking it all in with you. You ask a person next to you, "What is this for" and the local, through muddled English, explains it is for a historic occasion. It is to remember the good work that was done and the harvests that have fed the people and to look forward to the next year

... JOIN THE HISTORIC PARADE OF
PEOPLE ENJOYING GOD.

and its harvest ahead. You find yourself starting to join them in cheering and clapping. You join in the joy that is unfolding in front of you.

For a moment – what happens? I bet this; you forget about the fact that your luggage has been lost, and how bad your sleep was, and the half-finished email to Air NZ about the kiosk person and the entertainment unit that didn't work... The display of joy in front of you takes you somewhere else for a while. It takes you into the present moment where you can behold the joy of that parade. For a few moments, standing amongst the parade, a longing in you (one so much greater than the longing for your luggage or entertainment screen) is met.

Or, as C.S. Lewis put it: It surprises you.

What if when we sing together on Sunday, we're joining the joy of the parade?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism's opening statement is that man's chief end is to love God and enjoy him forever. Christian joy is perennially expressed in music, poetry, dance, celebration, humour, and laughter. We have a parade that comes past every Sunday.

One of the spaces where we can be a community that enjoys God, is our sung worship. When we sing, we are taking our cues from the Psalmists who have led the people of God in song for generations. We are joining with the expression of the church but also the expression of humanity as it puts songs to expressions of delight and gratitude, of beauty and ecstasy, of love! We join the historic parade of people enjoying God.

The human race has always sung; songs come out of all spheres of humanity for communally exclaiming what we are joyful about. And so, when we come together as people, that is one of the reasons we sing. That is why we use music and melody, dynamics of ups and downs, lifts and drops. Art that moves our soul and lifts our emotional state – not as a manipulative practice, but as a response to the song that is already going around as we join in life with God. We join the parade for a while, and when the parade is done, we go back to our trials and life lived with a different perspective.

We must remember where we started; there is a party going on in God's realm because lost things are being found, and so, they rejoice. God knows there is still plenty of suffering to be endured, and plenty more laments to be sung too, but also, we are invited to the parade to see that "everything He has, has always been ours" after all – when we sing even if just from the side of the parade, we join in this divine celebration. We remind ourselves that God's love is rejoicing in the return of our lives to him.

When we sing in worship, we are joining in on a joyful parade and celebration. Not that it denies the existence of what is suffering or hardship, but that it creates an outpost for us within that. It gives us another point to align to, and as a result, reminds us;
God's found me, I've found him – and he's not done with me yet. By His Spirit, He is making me a person of his loving joy, more and more yet.

So – if we are to be with God and be like God;

Our love is to be joyful.

We are to practice gratitude.

And we will have a resilient hope; no matter what comes,
and we will find ourselves in the parade – singing our hearts out.

BY ALISHA, DAN, ELLA,
GABRIELLE, ROB + VINEK

FIRST SUNDAY OF DELTA
OUTBREAK LEVEL 4

22 | 8 | 21

Peace

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS HEARD PREACHING, but also, the church has always read writings. Today we write. This is something that doesn't just go in one ear and out the other, but something that could be held in time. Words recorded down that they might be thought about in a deeper way. Considered and kept.

In the tradition of epistles (letters written to the churches of the New Testament) two thousand years ago, we send our love. We love you all so much, we have been praying for you this week and desire to be with you again soon, and we send grace and peace.

And today, peace is the particular one of importance because it's the theme of the Spirit we would have spoken about in our gathering and our series, "Be with, be like."

So, today we write about peace.

If you watched the news at all this week, you would have seen the absence of peace in our world perhaps shown clearest at this moment in the Taliban returning to take over Afghanistan, leaving fleeing Afghani citizens clinging to a US plane as took off. The stories of looming violence and coming persecution for women, Christians and foreigners are harrowing – and one interviewee said that "this is not what it was months ago when it was much more at peace."

We also know of the absence of peace in ourselves. We know those feelings and pangs in us that long for things to be right but we find ourselves unsettled

internally; anxiety, restlessness, lack of acceptance for how things are and what we can't change. We can often find ourselves using the phrase "I'm not at peace..."

Maybe a lot of this could be summed up by a song sing a song by Te Rautini which says this:

*He never told me
That it would be easy
He said suffering would come
But he promised peace, peace, peace.*

This song is stating the world we find ourselves in. One that is groaning from its lack of peace. But then it is also referencing Jesus' words in John 14:27, where Jesus said "I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a peace the world cannot give."

Jesus gives a peace the world cannot give because quite simply; the peace of the Kingdom of God is not the same peace. It's not measured by the same metric. Our world thinks of peace as the removal of what is wrong. But in Christian thought, peace is not the absence of suffering, it's the presence of something that transcends suffering and becomes an all new outpost within that. For us, peace is found in the establishing of God's Kingdom of peace; a peace of shalom where things are right and as they should be.

First of all, we can look and see that this peace was embodied in Jesus. We look to Christ and see what the King of Peace looks like – in Christ's reconciling action amongst sin, both in self-sacrifice entering into it, but also, in the

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CANNOT GIVE BECAUSE QUITE SIMPLY;
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standing resiliently against the power of evil by choosing the way of love, not violence. Peace isn't some retreat and removal, it isn't easy, it's activity – but what activity is it?

In Christian spirituality, peace designates the experience of a justly reconciled, harmonious relationship between God and humankind, among humans, and between humans and the whole created order. This peace begins from within, in an assurance given by God, and extends outward from this centre. In St Paul's expressions, God is "the God of peace" (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 3:16).

This idea of peace is so dominant for Paul's vision of God because when first-century Jews and Christians greeted each other, they said to each other the Hebrew word *shalom* (or the Greek *eirene*) as words that mean "peace". In saying this greeting, they acknowledged that they were passing to each other the peace from God to them.

This from-God-to-you movement is very important because we do not possess peace in ourselves as an inherent quality. It's been beaten out of us through the cracked creation we live in, because when God's perfect creation was broken by sin, peace is the main thing it broke. But God is injecting His peace back into creation. He always gives peace beyond the fallen formation in our humanness, not that would mean the abolition or elimination of all anxiety and fear but that we would taste more of it. As Paul reminded the Philippians, God's *shalom*, which surpasses human comprehension, can "throw a guard around your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7, our paraphrase). Or seen from another angle, as in 1 John 4:18, "perfect love," which could only mean the love of God, "drives out fear."

Again. A reminder in our series; all of the fruit of the Spirit are facets of God's love. When we receive God's love, we will receive inner peace by affect. We receive God's peace in God's love.

So, therefore, (those who know their New Testament letters will now "so, therefore" is another very epistle thing to do...) when we experience the peace of the God of peace, we cannot rest content with what it has done for us.

This experience doesn't end at just self-fulfilment. It makes us participants in God's mission—the reconciliation of all things to Godself in and through Jesus Christ. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, God has reconciled the world to Godself through Christ and entrusted to us the continuation of that peacemaking mission (2 Cor. 5:18–19). *The whole Christian mission is a grand peacemaking endeavour!*

So, we are called to be peacemakers.

The first step in that endeavour is to exhibit the oneness of God's new creation in the body of Christ. The apostle Paul insisted that "though many, [we] are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). Note that he said we "are," not we "will be" or "should be" or "can be." What he intended to imply is that communities of believers have to live up to what we are; a truly reconciled humanity, notwithstanding all of our diversity.

How do we do that? Jesus put it; "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God," Jesus said (Matt. 5:9 TNIV). Paul seemed to echo the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as he sketched the basics of being those children; love with genuine love, strive to outdo one another

in honouring one another, be generous and hospitable, bless and do not curse those who persecute you, share joys and sorrows, live in harmony, be humble and not haughty, live peaceably with all if you can, don't try to avenge yourselves, and shame enemies by doing good, overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:9–21).

In this list, the second step already become evident: we must strive for the reconciliation of humankind with God and with one another. In the Christian perspective, God, the triune God, is the number one peacemaker. Just as Father, Son, and Spirit live in intimate harmony with one another, so have they longed – actually, willed – for the whole creation to live in harmony with one another. Through the Son, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,” God reconciled everything to God–self, “making peace through his death on the cross, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col 1:15, 20). Observe here that God’s peacemaking extends not just to humankind but to the whole creation. Obviously, our peacemaking enterprise will aim first at reaching a fractured humanity, for we will find it difficult if not impossible to restore the created order without enlisting fellow human beings.

Let’s be honest, the task of effecting the reconciliation of humankind with God and with one another is an overwhelming one, so daunting that some throw up their hands in despair and abandon any effort. We can persevere only if we keep in mind the conviction that propelled where we started this letter, namely, that God is working together with those who love God to achieve this (Rom. 8:28). The challenge is this: we must not pare down God’s peacemaking vision to our size.

THE CHALLENGE IS THIS:
WE MUST NOT PARE DOWN GOD'S
PEACEMAKING VISION TO OUR SIZE.

Peacemakers today must address issues such as global warming and depletion of the earth's precious resources that threaten the very survival of humankind.

Peacemakers today must seek to see our bi-cultural journey as a nation honoured to its fullest.

Peacemakers today must not accept a life lived in an internal muddle, but seek to live the outpost of peace amongst the chaos more and more each day.

Peacemakers today are those who engage in reconciliation in the spaces around them, not ghosting people or drifting off in ambivalence, but choosing to make things right.

Peacemakers are connected richly to the One who is peace, that they too may be the ones of peace.

May you experience the love of God,
by the gracious Way of the Son
and peaceful work by His Spirit.

Shalom,

Alisha, Dan, Ella, Gabrielle, Rob and Vivek.

BY NATALIE WENDZIAK

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 4

5|9|21

Patience

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

THERE'S LIKELY SOME MIXED EXPERIENCES of lockdown amongst you. Some of you may love it as a temporary outpost from the busyness of 'normal' life. Some of you may hate it, as it means you can't do the things you love. You can't go to work or hug those close to your heart. For many of us, this is a time of waiting. Waiting in the uncertainty for whatever comes next. Waiting for things to go back to the way they were. Waiting on the world to change as John Mayer sings.

But what value is there in waiting? Is there something to be learned in the 'not knowing'. What if this is the perfect time for God to grow in us one facet of the fruit of the Spirit?

Today I write about patience. Maybe amidst much uncertainty, this is the last thing you want to hear today.

But as with all of the fruit of the Spirit, patience is not its own virtue. It is a manifestation of love.

Patience is love long-suffering. It is love untiring, persevering through the storm and the flood. It is love going the long way. It is love waiting. Let's paint the picture of our current reality:

Patience is love long-suffering while trying to work with the kids at home. It's being okay with continual interruptions because your heart is tuned to the Spirit of peace. It looks like being a non-anxious presence in a meeting room that is wrecked by the uncertainty of doing business in a post-Covid world.

Patience fleshed out is being in a situation of stress without getting wound up because you're resting in the knowledge that God is in control.

And we're all pretty bad at that aren't we? We live in an instant culture where we hate waiting. We hate standing in queues, we hate being on hold, we hate the traffic. We get annoyed when our Uber eats takes more than 30 mins (max!) to arrive. And we hate lockdown – waiting for our lives to 'restart' again.

For me, lockdown looks like living in an apartment with Ludwig (hubby) who is having Zoom calls for 8 hours a day while I am desperately trying to focus on the seven Excel spreadsheets in front of me with only a glass door to keep his voice out. It's patiently waiting on my mind to heal from some recent mental health stuff and doing the work to get there. It looks like waiting on God for guidance on whether to change careers or not. It's a long-suffering 45 minutes (!) in the queue every time I go to New World.

I'm a mixed bag (probably like you!) walking the frustrating, yet transformative road to patience in both the weighty and ephemeral things of life.

In the rush of modern-day living, we often live a reactive life rather than this intentional one and impatience is one of the first symptoms of this. If you're anything like me, you might already be aware of this. Every time I lose my cool or get easily annoyed I vow to be better next time. But I'm not. Like Paul says 'the good I want to do I do not do' (Rom 7:19). And the more I try the more frustrated I become that I don't actually show much of the fruit of the Spirit in my everyday life. If I'm lucky, I make it through the weekend to 10 am Monday morning when I'm painstakingly trying to explain something over a screen-share on Teams, and away we go on the train of impatience.

One of the first things you notice if you're seriously trying to practice the Christian life is that willpower won't get you far at all. It's no use getting into a frustrating situation and then trying really hard to be patient by clenching your fists and gritting your teeth. That's because the fruit of the Spirit are fruit. They are not virtues you work on. They are the harvest from abiding in the vine, from being with God.

My simple word today is this: Waiting on God is the only way to become a person of patient love.

But waiting on God is not the same as waiting for a Christmas present. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus.

Often when we talk about waiting on God, we really mean waiting for Him to do what we want, or to give us what we want. We are waiting on God for this house. Or that job. And please don't misunderstand me – God cares deeply about the things that we want and need. He is our provider and our Shepherd. But getting what we want is not the purpose of a life following Jesus. The Christian life is one of knowing God intimately, that we would become one with Him. It's a life of being loved by God so that over time, we become like Him and participate in His Kingdom.

Imagine waiting at a coffee shop for a friend.

When they arrive you ask them to pick up the tab, then, you leave.

What's the purpose of your friendship?

To wait on the Lord is to not wait for his Christmas gifts, or to leave as he arrives. It's to sit down with Him. Treat Him like you would a good friend.

... A LIFE OF BEING LOVED BY GOD
SO THAT OVER TIME, WE BECOME
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A Lover. It is to wait on Him, for who He is, not for what He can do for you. There's a difference.

Mother Teresa was once interviewed on prayer. It went something like this:

Interviewer: "You say that you pray all the time. What do you say to God?"

MT: "I don't say anything...I listen."

Interviewer: "Well, then what does He say to you?"

MT: "He doesn't say anything...He listens..."

There was a fairly long pause, after which Mother Teresa said,

"...and if you can't understand that, I cannot explain it to you."

Prayer does not always mean saying a lot of words. It can also mean waiting on God by simply listening.

Waiting on God is slow work. A word on each.

Firstly, it's slow. God is not in a hurry. And if we want to meet him, neither should we be. Perhaps the perfect illustration of waiting is this song by Will Reagan:

I'm not in a hurry
When it comes to Your spirit
When it comes to Your presence
When it comes to Your voice
I'm learning to listen
Just to rest in Your nearness
I'm starting to notice
You are speaking

But why so slow, God?

In the book of Hosea, God told Hosea to marry a prostitute. This was representative of Israel's relationship to God: running away to her other 'lovers' time after time. Yet, God kept waiting. Why ask Hosea to do this? It's one thing to understand this theoretically, but Hosea knew this practically. Day after day he woke up, not knowing whether his wife was with him or with another man. And he loved her. He learned day by day what it means for love to be long-suffering. To wait for his wife. To take her back again and again. Hosea understood through this hard life how God felt about Israel. How he grieved for her. How he loved her so deeply that he kept waiting for her.

What a picture of God's love! He loves so deeply that He would wait a lifetime for us to run back to his arms.

Was this a waste of Hosea's life? From our time-poor, make-every-minute-count mindset, absolutely. We're conditioned to believe that 'a day not enjoyed is a day wasted' and that 'suffering has no purpose'. But brothers and sisters, what if waiting has a purpose? Hosea's life of waiting taught him one of the

greatest lessons of all – love has a different pace. It's slow. It's long–suffering.

So how do we renovate our heart into one of patience? How do we rewire our easily provoked minds? Well, as our friend John Mark Comer would say, “It's not about trying really hard it's about training really hard.”

This brings us to work. Waiting for God is slow work. Training for something takes mahi.

Borrowing a metaphor for JMC again: Can I run a marathon tomorrow? No.

But if I follow a training plan: start with 1km a day this week, up it to 2km per day next week. Take appropriate rest days. Do my long runs on the weekends. Do some strength training in–between. Get my mental game right. In time, I will be able to run a marathon. When it comes to race day, while it will not be easy, I will be able to do it because I have trained for it. Over time, I will have become a person who can run a marathon.

Waiting on God is to “being patient” what training is to “running a marathon”. Absolutely essential.

Over time, with training, we can become the kind of people who can learn the way of God's long–suffering patience.

So how do we train?

In order for us to start adopting the patient, long–suffering nature of God, we have to start by waiting on the Lord, alone. Abiding with Him. Spending lots of slow time with Him. Lounging around with Jesus. And faithfully showing up

PRACTISING PATIENCE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE
TRYING REALLY HARD TO BE PATIENT.
IT LOOKS LIKE WAITING ON GOD,
OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

again and again.

Practising patience doesn't look like trying really hard to be patient. It looks like waiting on God, over and over again.

So, therefore, (you saw that coming didn't you) make the practice of patience and waiting on God one of the top priorities in your life. Quiet time. Silence and solitude. Prayer. Show up to be with God and allow Him to transform your heart into His own. When you show up, He will show up. And over time this becomes something you yearn for: to simply be with your Father. Where you can say "my beloved is mine and I am His" (Song of Songs 2:16).

Ronald Rolheiser says this about showing up: "But the habit of prayer, the ritual, simple fidelity to the act, showing up to do it irrespective of feelings and mood, can sustain prayer for a lifetime and reign in the roaming of the head and heart."

Remember, this is slow work. True to God's own character: change will not happen immediately. Not in a week. Or even in a month. But over years of showing up day after day. God is a faithful farmer. He will prune your heart and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in you. Until one day you will wake up, see those dirty dishes in the sink and be able to love the person behind the dishes. You'll walk out the door, not seething with anger, but with a song in your heart.

What better time to practice this than in the forced slowing of life in lockdown?

What will it look like for you to practice 'waiting on the Lord'? How can you add this rhythm to the formless days of lockdown? With constant news alerts

driving our underlying anxieties higher and keeping us on edge, priming a reactive spirit in us – what if we resist the call of Covid to fear, and instead we ‘wait’. What if instead, we trust in the Lord to show up. We switch off our devices (even just for an hour) and we be still with God.

I do this with a coffee and a journal before work every day. I wait on the Lord. Sometimes there’s a Psalm involved, sometimes just quiet. But I start every day with “Here I am Lord. Come, Holy Spirit.” And then I just wait, palms up.

What does this look like for you?

Maybe you can do the Prayer of Examen before bed? Maybe you find some quiet before the kids wake up or after they go to sleep? Maybe you take a prayer walk at lunchtime. Where can you find space to simply wait on the Lord for who He is?

This week, may you start a habit of finding a place of quiet in the chaos. May you be still before the Lord and wait on Him. May you know that God’s time is not our time and that He holds your life in His hand. And I pray that you may know rest for your soul in surrender, where nothing can shake you. Where your own waiting on the Lord rewires your heart to patient loving and long-suffering kindness, like His.

May you be with, and become like.

Shalom,
Natalie.

BY ROB WISEMAN

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 4

12/9/21

Kindness

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

IN RECENT TIMES the phrase ‘be kind’ has been heard from the lips of our Prime Minister almost daily. If you’re anything like me, as sincere as the comment is, her reminder to ‘be kind’ is met with an internal eye roll and is assigned to the metaphorical container reserved for cliché political rhetoric.

Now for those far more mature than me, for those less cynical, I applaud you and I welcome your prayers. Regardless of where you land it’s fair to say that ‘be kind’ somewhere along the lines has lost its punch. For some, it means one thing and for others, it means another but what should it mean for us as disciples of Christ, or in other words, students of Christ?

Today I write about kindness.

Kindness is the fifth fruit of the Spirit. As Natalie mentioned last week, like patience, kindness is not a virtue on its own. It’s a manifestation of love. In fact, kindness is so inextricably linked to love that early Bible translators coined the word loving-kindness based on the Hebrew word *hesed* which incorporates kindness, love and grace all into one.

At a base level, we all know kindness when we see it. Kindness is the quality of being generous, helpful, and caring about other people, or an act showing this quality. So, giving money to someone in need is kind. Complimenting someone on their appearance or character is kind. Delivering groceries to someone in Level 4 lockdown because they have to self isolate is kind.

Simply put, kindness is focused on others, is selfless and benefits the one it’s

aimed at. However, as with all the fruit of the Spirit, the kindness we see found in the Bible, God's version of kindness, goes beyond our culture's. It adds some extra characteristics that set it apart from culture's version.

Generally speaking, culture's version of 'be kind' has unspoken sub-clauses attached. Such as:

Be kind...to a point.

Be kind...if you can.

Be kind...as long as it's not too costly.

As someone with a full-time job and income, if I gave \$1 to someone in need while it would be a nice thing to do but in reality, I wouldn't miss that \$1. In reality, it means very little to me so, therefore, is it really kind? Our culture would say "Yes, of course – you didn't have to give money away. They now have an extra \$1 that they didn't have before." While that is true, if we were to use Biblical expressions of kindness as a metric we'd have to answer; no.

Biblical kindness is costly to the giver, be it time, money or pride.

Perhaps a story that best exemplifies this is the story of The Good Samaritan who stopped and tended to the needs of a man who was essentially his arch-enemy. Not only did the Samaritan tend to the man's wounds he also paid for his accommodation and returned later to see how he was doing. This act of kindness cost the Samaritan his time, his money, his pride and social status. It was a costly exercise.

These costly acts of kindness are littered throughout the Bible. I think of the

BIBLICAL KINDNESS IS COSTLY TO THE GIVER,
BE IT TIME, MONEY OR PRIDE.

woman bursting into the room where she shouldn't have been in, filled with men high above her social status and extravagantly pouring out expensive perfume onto Jesus. I think of Jesus, though exhausted and hungry from teaching all day, continuing to teach because he had compassion on the people (Matthew 6:30–34). Biblical kindness is costly to the giver. There is a price to pay.

While Biblical kindness costs the giver it never costs the one who receives it. Many of you will know about Gratis. The community meal initiative at CV that provides people in need with food, community and connection.

More times than I care to admit I've found myself seething when the free, hot meals that the team and I have prepared, cooked and handed out to those in need has been met with ungratefulness, complaints and indignation. We've even had people throw their meal on the ground in protest because, for some reason, they weren't happy with it.

When this happens, my head is flooded with thoughts; "How dare you, who do you think you are, you have no idea what's gone into this meal, you ungrateful little...so and so". I take offence. Don't they see how much time and effort has gone into this? I don't have to be doing this, don't they see how kind I am, don't they see how great I am?

At this moment I'm confronted with the fact that the supposed "free" meal I handed out in apparent kindness wasn't really free after all. Instead of money, I was wanting recognition and gratitude. Recognition for my time, energy and service. However, in wanting this, I have stepped out of the realm of kindness and turned it into a transaction.

In the book of Luke Jesus says:

“If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.

Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” (Luke 6:32–34)

You see, Biblical kindness has no strings attached, it costs nothing for the one who receives it, it is given and expects nothing in return – not even gratitude. As noted in verse 35 God’s kindness extends to those who are ungrateful. In the same verse, Jesus says that God’s kindness is extended to those who are wicked; other translations use the word evil. This is another way of saying God’s kindness is available and extended to all.

God’s kindness doesn’t discriminate.

It’s extended to people who have different socio–political views to us.

It’s extended to the person whose social media post we took offence at.

It’s extended to the man who attacked those people in Countdown, New Lynn.

It’s extended to me and it’s extended to you.

Since I was a child I have always been drawn to the underdog or the down

ALL OF HUMANITY IS OUR NEIGHBOUR.
WHERE OUR CULTURE SAYS SOME ARE
MORE WORTHY OF KINDNESS THAN OTHERS,
GOD SAYS EVERYONE IS WORTHY OF KINDNESS.

and out. For whatever reason, I have attracted attention from and been drawn towards those who struggle to fit in. As a child, I would take people under my wing and go into bat for them when necessary, particularly in the often brutal setting of school. I have always had a soft spot for the disenfranchised and the marginalised. Subsequently, I find it easy to treat them with kindness.

While that all sounds nice and self-congratulatory, conversely I struggle to show the same level of kindness to those who, in my eyes, appears to have it all together and act like they know they do. For me, nothing is harder than showing kindness to someone who I believe has cruised through life, has got everything for nothing and lives for themselves. Add to that recipe even the slightest hint of arrogance and it's all over, it's near impossible for me to show them kindness.

Yet, Biblical kindness, the kindness Jesus extends, calls me to extend it to them as much as I would my wife, my kids and my friends. This is the 'love your neighbour as yourself' idea in action. All of humanity is our neighbour. Where our culture says some are more worthy of kindness than others, God says everyone is worthy of kindness.

Everyone is worthy of kindness. A kindness that costs us and seeks nothing in return because the cost is worth it – people are worth it. This is the same kindness shown to us by God through Jesus.

Philippians 2:6–8 says:

Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own

*advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death
even death on a cross!*

If kindness is costly if kindness is extended to all if kindness seeks nothing in return if kindness is generous and contingent on nothing. Then the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus is surely the very definition of kindness. Even if that was all God did that would be enough, yet, in addition to that, God answers prayers, He heals, He provides, He desires a relationship with us. He sets us apart. The kindness of God is mind–blowing!

Ephesians 4:32 says, “...be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you”.

We are to be kind because God is kind.

God is kind.

God is a kind God.

They are phrases that no doubt we’ve all heard. I have memories of singing songs of God’s kindness and goodness at children’s church, of playing games that involved reciting the fruit of the Spirit in order to receive a chocolate fish

(it was a good time. Chocolate fish are a great time. I'd recite anything to get a chocolate fish!). Growing up I was read stories of God's kindness: How he led the Israelites out of Egypt; how he stopped an angry mob from killing a woman; how he touched and healed lepers and ultimately; how he sent His Son to die in my place. The idea that God is kind has been ingrained in me since I was a child. It is not novel, I know it. Yet how many of us have learned it's easy to 'KNOW' something but to believe it is another kettle of chocolate fish.

Maybe you had the opposite experience where you grew up with the message that God is an angry and vengeful God and the notion that God is kind is at best novel and at worst foreign and unbelievable. Like the catchphrase of our Prime Ministers, I wonder, for some of us, if the idea of a kind God has been relegated into the metaphorical container reserved for cliché Christian rhetoric.

Whatever your experience, today I pose this question. Do you believe that God is kind? Not do you know or have you heard, but do you believe, deep down in the core of your being, that God is kind

Is God's kindness a lived experience or just an idea? I'd suggest that our response to this question will impact how we cultivate and exemplify the spiritual fruit of kindness in our lives. If we cannot see that the architect of kindness is God, that God is kind then we hinder ourselves from receiving the blessing of God's kindness and extending it to others.

If the notion that God is kind is not a lived experience for you I want to suggest two points that I pray will be helpful.

Firstly, invite someone into the conversation. We were not made to do this on

our own. Talk to a friend, talk to a pastor, talk to someone who can share and pray with you.

Secondly, and more importantly, invite God into the conversation. Sit with Him, wait on Him. Tell Him where you're at. Tell Him what you're feeling. Tell Him what you're not feeling but wished you were. He's a big boy, he can take it. Ask Him to open your eyes and heart to the beauty of His life-changing kindness.

For those who truly believe that God is kind and have experienced His kindness, I invite you on a journey of self-reflection, to take stock of your own expressions and definitions of kindness.

Spiritual fruit grows as a result of Christ living in us through the Spirit. As our faith matures these fruit should continue to grow and become more evident. While willpower alone and trying harder is futile in growing the fruit it would be remiss of us to not approach kindness with some sort of intention. After all, in order for fruit to grow it needs to be intentionally nurtured.

So, therefore, I ask you as I ask myself;

Does your kindness cost you? Do your expressions of kindness come with the expense of time, money, pride or status? Or do they cost you very little?

Does your kindness expect anything in return? Praise, affirmation or gratitude to name a few. Or are your expressions of kindness like Christ's contingent on nothing.

Is your kindness extended to everyone? Or, like mine, is it reserved for some more than others. Does the person on the street or the person who is making bad life choices or the person you disagree with on social media receive the same level of kindness shown to your like-minded friends, your family and those closest to you?

Now, my intention is not to shame us, or to make any of us feel bad. If Jesus is our measuring stick the bar is super high and the reality is we could spend a lifetime maturing in our faith and we'll still fall short. My intention is to draw us back to what God's expression of kindness looks like and to use that as a metric for our own.

Finally, I invite you all to dream a little with me. What would it look like if tomorrow, every Christ-follower woke up with the understanding and lived experience that God is kind and that God's extravagant kindness is extended to them? What would it look like if tomorrow every Christ followers' definition and expressions of kindness mirrored that of Jesus'? What would it look like if the Church (capital C church) was known for its loving-kindness more than anything else?

What a glorious picture this would be.

Aroha nui,

Rob.

BY STRAHAN GOEMAN

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 4

19|9|21

Goodness

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

GREETINGS FROM TAIRUA, old friends! Safe to say I miss you all more than you could know and I'm gutted not to be there with you in person today. I'm feeling for you all in lockdown up there and the exhaustion some of you must be feeling. I'm praying that God's grace and presence is powerfully with you in the harder moments and that in this season of your life, despite what circumstances may try to dictate, you would experience the goodness of God.

I was recently in conversation with someone struggling with that – the goodness of God. They were someone who had felt personally let down by him. They had a friend who suffered cerebral palsy and who later fell blind on the very morning of their wedding day. It was hard for them to say that God was good and actually mean it. How can we say God is good in the face of such real suffering?

I know that struggle well. It's a struggle I've felt throughout nearly 7 years of chronic sickness. The reality is since I saw you last I've been really crook and my battle to say, "God you're good" in the midst of wave after wave of tests, life-altering diagnosis' and the disappointment of long periods of immobilisation has been under duress yet again. And yet, I can say with all my heart and soul that truly, God is good!

Scripture is full of the reality of God's goodness. Not just in the things he does but in his very nature. In the times of the Exodus, after the descendants of Abraham had suffered slavery for four hundred years we hear them calling him by the name "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (Exodus 34:6). Psalm 135:3 demands

that we “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love endures forever!” and of course in Galatians 5 we hear that “goodness” is a fruit of the Spirit because the fruit can only bear from the vine that gives it life. Apples come from apple trees, grapes come from grapevines and goodness comes from a good God.

God does good things not because he tries or needs to, but because it’s all he can do. Goodness himself can only do good things.

This presents a problem for many of us. Because sometimes our experience would have us believe otherwise. I know for me personally in my hardest moments in the first years of my sickness it wasn’t self-evident that God was good and doing good things in my life. I couldn’t see, feel or account for it.

Enter the transcendentals.

The transcendentals are a philosophical trilogy of the moral fabric of the universe first made famous by the Greek philosophers, specifically Plato (stay with me here, we’re going somewhere). They suggested that divine things and the divine Being must manifest Truth, Beauty and Goodness simultaneously. In other words, beauty must also be good to be truly beautiful, and goodness must also be true to be truly good and so on. They’re called the transcendentals because, philosophically, they’re the meta-reality of the cosmos and that truth has remained so for millennia since their coining. Christian theologians have maintained the same belief too because we believe that God’s goodness is irremovable from his truth and beauty. They give context to each other.

Because it’s possible to say something is good, when in fact it’s not. If anyone could define goodness however they saw it themselves then goodness would

lose all its quality. I may say that it's good, for example, to keep all my money to myself. You may say it's good to give my money to the poor. Without Truth, goodness is unanchored and meaningless. As is any fruit of the Spirit that we've covered these past weeks.

The reason God is good, isn't just because he makes us feel good or because he's a "good guy". God is good because everything he does is True and Beautiful and the reality of that Truth especially, is that it's often far beyond our reality to fully comprehend. Jesus was good not just because he loved the sick and poor and died for our sins, but because he preached and lived and taught the truth. It was good when he convicted the Pharisees, for example, by asking them without sin to cast the first stone on the adulteress, but it was also true because he then told her to go and sin no more.

Many of us would feel comfortable applauding those today who defend the unnecessary villainization of people caught in sexual sin, but would we apply the same principle of goodness to inviting them to obey the truth as well?

The law of the transcendentals, and more importantly the witness of Christ, would say that goodness requires the presence of both.

Jesus was good, precisely because he was true.

This is where the rubber hits the road for you and I in the culture we find ourselves in. Goodness in our post-Christian culture has largely become detached from truth. Goodness tends to be whatever the prevailing cultural wind asserts it to be. There's a painful confusion about the goodness of God because how could a good God for example want me to wait until I'm married

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to have sex with the one I love, or to stay in a friendship, marriage or job that makes me unhappy, or to refrain from heavy drinking when I just want to have some fun? Or for me personally, how could a good God not heal me when I'm so sick?

The reason we may struggle to accept the truth of God's goodness in these circumstances is that our culture – our post-modern culture – has largely located the definition of truth in what we feel, what's internalised, rather than what we believe and what's externalised.

In other words, if we don't feel like God is good, or if we sense he's asking us to commit to a way of life that doesn't feel good to us, then our response is to charge God with the conviction of being wrong, of being un-good, and not ourselves.

I believe I stand with the witness of Christ and scripture when I say that as Christians we're called to something far deeper than that. But what's the alternative? What does it look like to be made into the shape of God's goodness and not our own or culture's?

Well, first it means abiding in God's goodness. It's not just about any kind of prayer, it's about praying with our belief conforming to God's truth. It's praying with the disposition that God is the most good Person in the cosmos, that his will for us is good, that everything he does is good and that he is far more good than anything else in our lives. We won't abide in God's goodness if we don't believe it, and we believe it not because of our feelings but because of the witness of Christ and scripture. If that sounds circular to you, you're right! Welcome to the definition of faith.

WE CAN'T BEAR THE FRUIT OF GOODNESS
WITHOUT OBEDIENCE TO THE TEACHINGS
OF CHRIST.

I know that's not necessarily easy either. How can we believe God is good when we can't feel it? By abiding in the scriptures that proclaim it. By memorizing them and meditating on them. But speaking to our thoughts and feelings the way Psalm 135:3 does saying "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love endures forever!" The truth of God's goodness won't happen by accident, it will take a reforming of our minds and feelings and the humility to accept that, just because we don't understand something, it doesn't make it less true.

Prayer is the home of experiential knowledge, where theology becomes reality. Practising sitting in and with the good God will make God good in your world. Or in the language of The Lord's Prayer, it will make God's "kingdom come, here on earth (or in me) as it is in heaven."

But there's another important element to bearing the fruit of God's goodness in our lives and it comes with a bit of an unapologetic bite, and that's through obedience to Christ's good commands. That's why in the same passage about abiding in John 15 Jesus also says, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (verse 10).

Goodness is not subjective, it's not an emotion or an intention, it's not being a nice guy or a moral wet wipe (too harsh?!). It's a life obedient to the gospel of Christ as taught in Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, and the reality is that it sometimes doesn't look like goodness to the world around us. It didn't to Jesus' contemporaries, it didn't to Rome and often hasn't throughout history.

We can't bear the fruit of goodness without obedience to the teachings of Christ. Abiding in prayer, though it's our first port of call, won't make us into

the shape of goodness if we're refusing to forgive those who hurt us, sleeping with others outside marriage in thought or deed, over-drinking, keeping our money to ourselves, and using our tongues as weapons. That's profoundly challenging for all of us, but that's why the gospel is no cheap invitation. It's a call to a life of goodness through the Spirit in obedience to the truth.

If you're looking for a plumb line to discover whether the goodness you're living is God's goodness, a goodness in Truth, I recommend reading Matthew 5 – The Sermon on the Mount – and holding it to that standard. Because that's what goodness looks and feels like. It has teeth, conviction, care and the power of radical love. That's the beauty of the kingdom of heaven.

But what about my friend at the start who was struggling to say that God is good? What about me and my own ability to pronounce God's goodness in my enduring illness? This is where I feel so much good news, so much joy and freedom. Because when, in my sickness and confusion, I have no way of seeing or knowing what God is doing in my life is good, I can throw myself with abandon on the cosmic truth of his goodness. Not because I understand or see it, but because it's true. By trusting that God is good even when I can't see it, I shape my experience to Reality itself. I force myself to accept true goodness. My suffering is made good.

In other words, a goodness rooted in truth saves me from my feelings. It calls me beyond myself.

This gospel is a powerful reversal of the tide of the age. It makes goodness an objective reality we submit to, something to free us from our mental prisons and physical disorientation. Goodness becomes a refuge for people like me

who need a way out of my head, of my sense-making, and into the experiential reality of God.

Friends, God is immeasurably good. He's magnificent and beautiful and wonderful. I know that to be true in another bed-ridden year like this as much as any other because it's simply reality. Something I can give my feelings and experience to be shaped after.

So may you experience the magnitude of God's goodness, in your suffering, in your daily life, in your prayerful experiences, that you may become a conduit of that gritty goodness in a world unanchored from the Christ who loves it.

Your friend, brother and fellow pilgrim in love,
Strahan.

BY VIVEK GABRIEL

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 3

26/9/21

Faithfulness

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

IT IS MY ABSOLUTE PRIVILEGE AND HONOUR to write to you this week. I hope you find this letter encouraging after what is no doubt, another challenging week of Lockdown. Today, I write to you about faithfulness, which is the next fruit of the Spirit in our series *Be with, be like*. My sincere prayer for us is that we would have a fresh revelation of the God who is described as abounding in faithfulness and be filled with his spirit to reflect this faithfulness into the world.

I have really been enjoying this series, to me, it has felt like an echo of one of my favourite Psalms, Psalm 1; which describes a person who is blessed, someone who has nothing to do with wickedness but rather they are delighting and meditating on the law of the Lord or, as another translation puts it, the instruction of the Lord. This person is likened to a tree that has been planted by streams of living water that bears its fruit in season. The tree is connected to a life-giving source and is bearing the fruit of that new life flowing through it.

In considering this, I couldn't help but wonder what *Be with, be like* was for Jesus? Could it be that he is the perfect fulfilment of the person described in Psalm 1, he is 'that' tree that is planted by the streams of God, the one who truly delighted, meditated and faithfully outworked God's Law? If that is so, could this be part of the answer for us— on how we are to abide in God's faithfulness? The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus often withdrew to pray by himself. I wonder how much of his prayer life was him praying the Psalms, meditating on the Torah or considering the Prophets?

Faithfulness is the quality of being faithful, both the Hebrew and Greek

words used in the Bible to communicate this idea have a breadth of meaning, ranging from truth, reliability, loyalty, consistency, fidelity, firmness, and trustworthiness. If you want to dig a bit deeper, the Bible Project video on the Hebrew word *emet* is a great start.

But because God is faithful in everything he does – every work and action of His becomes a testimony of His faithfulness. So there are innumerable ways in which we could meditate upon the faithfulness of God, a good example of this is Psalm 136 – 26 times the Psalmist recalls an act of God and 26 times they respond with the exclamation – “His faithful love endures forever.” Today, that’s what I want to draw our attention to, God’s faithful love towards humanity and his commitment to renew and restore creation.

Although I do not want to discount myself from being used by God, there is something not right about a 34-year-old talking about the faithfulness of God. I mean, is 34 years really enough time to make an objective claim on the faithfulness of God? According to some studies the male brain isn’t even fully developed until it’s 30!?! That was only a few years ago!

Maybe, my 80-year-old aunties in India who have seen and experienced a far greater range of joys and sorrows and yet call God faithful might be a better voice, or we could turn to the generations of saints who have gone before, those who have called God faithful in the face of persecution, poverty, famine, mental health challenges, chronic illness and all other manners of suffering.

While God’s faithfulness can be seen in each individual life, I think it benefits us to take a step back and to hopefully stand on a more concrete view of the faithfulness of God. What we might need to consider is a collection of stories

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over an extended period of time. Stories like those of Adam & Eve, Abraham & Sarah, Jacob & Leah, Joseph, Israel, Moses, David, Esther and the list goes on. Stories that trace God's faithful love for humanity and his commitment to renew creation.

Enter the Scriptures, our Bible. The Scriptures are a collection of stories, a continuing narrative of God faithfully working in and through his people, they start with creation and end in a new creation, from the beginning to a new beginning – it's an eternal story! Just the kind of story that makes sense of a God who is not bound by time and space. We all know the story, but how much of this big narrative is influencing our everyday lives? And how much of our story is being lived in the context of the much larger narrative of God and His faithfulness?

The faithfulness of God proven in these Old Testament stories provided the context for Jesus' identity, call, vocation and mission. They ultimately enabled Him to be faithful even to the cross, even unto death, as he knew that his father was trustworthy and faithful. Jesus entered into the story and played his part and now because of his death, resurrection, and ascension he has enabled us through his spirit to be a part of the story of God's faithfulness.

To further explore God's faithfulness, let's briefly remind ourselves of some key moments in the grand narrative of Scripture.

God speaks a good creation into being.

This good and perfect creation is cracked by the influence of an evil force and the willingness of man to question God's trustworthiness.

God's immediate response to humanity: "Where are you?"

That's right: where are you guys?

Then he covers their shame and nakedness.

These simple actions at the very beginning reveal the heart of God, they speak of his love for humanity and show us his intention to redeem and renew creation.

But the story continues. As one rabbi said, “God made Adam and when that didn’t work out, he sent Abraham.” God renews his commitment to humanity and makes a promise to Abraham that he will be the “father of a multitude of nations” and that “In his seed or descendant all the nations of earth shall be blessed”. God is faithful to Abraham and Sarah despite them trying to make this promise happen on their own.

Or remember Jacob, a shady, lying character who steals his birthright and is perpetually on the run – eventually God’s love and faithfulness catches up to him and he proclaims “I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant”. God is faithful despite Jacob’s insecurity and chaos.

In Joseph’s case, his own brothers betray him but God is faithful to rescue, renew and bless his family. For many of us, we also have a story where God is the only faithful one in our situation.

When the descendants of Abraham are enslaved in Egypt, God hears their cry, delivers them from oppression and calls them his own people. When the Psalmist considered this, he wrote “He remembered us in our weakness. His faithful love endures forever.”

This becomes a theme for the Israelites, even during the Babylonian Siege they

remember in the Book of Lamentations:

*But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.*

As hundreds of years pass, there are countless stories of God's faithfulness to his people and their consistent unfaithfulness towards him. Eventually, God appoints a new king over Israel, King David, and makes him an eternal promise similar to the one he made Abraham, He promises him that his son will be King over an everlasting Kingdom.

This, my friends, is why the New Testament starts with "The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:" There is a reason for the long list at the start to the Gospel of Matthew, we are drawn into a story, not of men and women but a story of God's faithfulness to his people.

The beauty about all these stories for me is that God exhibits a special, loyal & faithful love with each individual but at the same time he has all of humanity and creation in mind as He weaves through His redemption plan despite our sin and frailty.

When King David is faced with his own sinful faithlessness, he writes;

*Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*

Faithfulness is not just a lovely character trait, it is something that God's desires for us even before we are born. He is looking for people who are formed in faithfulness, faithful towards Him, faithful towards one another and faithful towards His creation.

So, what does all this look like practically?

I want to suggest two simple postures: sitting and walking. Yes, sitting and walking.

When Jesus was 12, he travelled to Jerusalem for a festival with His parents, when His family left for home, they left without Him. Days later when he was found, he was found sitting. Luke, in his gospel, comments "After three days they found Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."

Central Vineyard, let's learn from the boy Jesus. I want to encourage us to open the Scriptures and sit with our Rabbi. Let's consider the stories that gave context to His life and mission, let's consider Him so that our story, like His, might be faithfully integrated with the faithfulness of God.

Returning to Psalm 1, like Jesus, we need to grasp what it means to meditate upon the law day and night – Jesus had a grasp of the scriptures that allowed

him to face the deception of the Devil, and correct the way the Pharisees mishandled the scriptures, all the while being faithful to God and pouring out God's steadfast love to the people around Him.

The truth is this does not come naturally to me, before I was 18 years old I had read a grand total of zero books. In my younger years growing up in India, my worst subjects were languages. I had to study Kannada and Hindi – I was terrible at both of them. At the age of 12 when we moved to Aotearoa, the struggle continued. I was always scraping by in English, reading was the last thing I wanted to do. Most of my spare time was cricket and more cricket and, in my later teens, I was obsessed with electronics and music production. Oh, the irony of writing this letter right now!

But something changed when I became a Christian at the age of 18, I started living the Christian life and suddenly I needed to figure out how to do this life, so I started reading the Bible obsessively. I started doing it instinctively, it was a necessity for this new life I was called into. If you are struggling to engage with scripture or find it difficult to understand, may I humbly suggest that it makes a lot more sense when you are walking this life.

In the book of Galatians, just before Paul is about to list the Fruit of the Spirit, he calls his readers to action, He says “walk by the Spirit...” and again after the list, he states: “since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

Faithfulness begins with small steps. Jesus said, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much”.

What small steps is the Spirit asking you to take today?

IT MAKES A LOT MORE SENSE WHEN YOU ARE
WALKING THIS LIFE.

Is it keeping your word to your spouse or the promises you make to your kids?

Is it turning up on time?

Is it paying your bills on time?

Is it being truthful about your mental health?

Whatever it is that God is calling you to step into, these small Spirit-led steps of obedience end up reflecting the faithfulness of God and ultimately bring Him glory.

Friends, this is not something to be forced, consider the words of the apostle Paul “the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” God is ultimately proved faithful because He sent His only begotten Son for us and there is nothing that can separate you from the faithful love of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, walk in the assurance of the faithful, steadfast and unfailing love of God.

My prayer for our community is that we are able to join with David in Psalm 26 and say confidently “I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.”

Heavenly Father, search our hearts and minds and make us a faithful people just as You are Faithful.

Vivek.

BY GABRIELLE SHEED

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 3

3/10/21

Gentleness

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

IT HAS FELT LIKE SUCH A LONG TIME since we have all been together, how I have missed that! I know that we have all probably experienced good days and bad days over the last few weeks but I hope you all are well. Maybe you have been able to enjoy a little treat or two over the last week as businesses have begun to open, or perhaps you have experienced the joy of including close family in your bubble if you've been able to. I know we have definitely loved having my mum and dad in our bubble now!

This week's fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. I have to confess that, at first I wasn't quite sure how to approach this one. In my experience, this has often been one of the least spoken about fruit, at least on its own, the quieter sibling to the big hitters of love, joy and peace for example.

Yet, considering how hidden it is as a trait, scholars agree that gentleness is clearly a character trait of the Trinity and we see it often throughout the Scriptures. In the 23rd Psalm, David describes God to be like a shepherd who leads us to be in green pastures and by gentle streams; God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper; the prophetic descriptions of Jesus' coming in Zechariah 9:9 don't show him as someone filled with pomp and splendour (which would be expected at this time for a great leader) but that he will come in gentle humility; Jesus (who let's remember, is God incarnate) symbolically enters Jerusalem as "gentle and riding on a donkey" in Matthew 21:5, and Jesus describes himself as a "gentle, humble servant who provides comfort and rest" in Matthew 11:29.

If we focus in on Jesus, what a contrast he would have been to the Roman leaders that the people in Jerusalem would have seen and known! Roman

emperors saw all of their power resting in their military dominance and physical prowess. The Roman world itself was a fairly ruthless place to be, very little consideration was given to the poor or the sick, and it was often pretty lawless and chaotic. To have a leader be gentle and kind to others would have been unfathomable and at odds with the social norms of the Roman world. This is a counter-cultural trait of Jesus; it helps to set Jesus apart in the Roman world.

Perhaps this is all best shown in a scene in Mark 10. Jesus is with his disciples, and two of them – John and James who are nicknamed “The Sons of Thunder” – ask Jesus if they can sit at his side when he is in power. They still think that Jesus is going to get things done like the Romans do things. But Jesus says to them this very important line; “You know the leaders of this world love to lord their power over their people, they love to flaunt their authority. But amongst you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader must be a servant” Jesus then goes on to yet again stress that he has come as a servant to serve, not as a powerful militant ruler.

“Amongst you it will be different.”

What if one of the key markers of this “difference” is Jesus’ gentleness?

We then see this echoed in Paul who understood the importance of behaving towards others with the same gentleness as shown by Jesus (although we also see him struggle with this at times). In Colossians 3:12 he says that “since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”. And we see this again in Paul’s encouragement to Timothy in 1 Timothy 11, that he is to

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THIS "DIFFERENCE" IS JESUS' GENTLENESS?

“pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness”.

In our current mainstream culture gentleness seems to fly under the radar. However, it is starting to be sought out again along with its companion kindness. Perhaps in the current global chaos we find ourselves in, our deep-rooted sense of what God calls us to is being inherently longed for, whether through the church or secular culture.

In psychology fields, while there is limited research into gentleness, interestingly it is considered to be a compound character strength, meaning that it exists as a combination of other characteristics such as humility, forgiveness, and kindness. Gentle people are often considered to be empathetic, have high social intelligence, and are loving with a high degree of openness or receptivity to others. Gentleness is also considered to be an “other-oriented” strength, putting the needs of others ahead of ourselves.

In the business world, there is a growing awareness of the need for leaders to use ‘gentle power’ to better unite and encourage their teams and organisations during uncertain times. Leaders who show empathy make their organisations more effective, encourage a positive team climate, and increase employee retention. They are seen as for their people and not against them. In my own working life, previous managers and bosses who were gentle in their approach with their staff were the ones who were truly loved and valued by their teams. Their gentleness didn’t mean they were a push-over or let people do what they wanted, but they took the time to know their staff, ask how they were doing and looked for ways to support and encourage them.

In a world where the loudest or angriest voice can seem to generate the biggest reaction in society, and gentleness can be portrayed as weakness, there is something so counter-cultural in the gentleness of God.

This may seem far from what some people think of when they think of God, they may think of Him as angry or discriminatory but actually, in looking at the Scriptures I started within this letter, we see that God has always been and will be gentle with us. That doesn't mean that he lets us do whatever we want, but that he gently encourages us back to him. In his loving ways, He gently holds us together when we are angry, or when we grieve and when we are uncertain.

Jane Williams, assistant dean of St Mellitus theological college says, "Gentleness is a quiet assured strength in knowing who you are in Christ to such an extent that you don't need to have anyone else validate you." In this age of self-promotion, the fruit of gentleness would mean that you don't need to get worked up or anxious about that, but instead, gentleness starts in the deep-rooted knowledge that you are loved by God, first.

In the past year, I have felt this assured strength especially. I have experienced grief and sadness in seeing my Dad become really sick and in the loss of a baby. And yet I have felt gently held and loved by God. The gentleness of God has meant that I haven't felt angry or resentful, but that I am loved and cared for right in the midst of what I am going through and that He will hold me throughout it all. I have also felt the gentle prodding of God to see new growth through a hard season, to have a new perspective on who I am and what God is calling me to. To be able to see green shoots after what has felt like a wintry season.

IN A WORLD WHERE THE LOUDEST AND ANGRIEST VOICE CAN SEEM TO GENERATE THE BIGGEST REACTION IN SOCIETY, AND GENTLENESS CAN BE SEEN AS A WEAKNESS, THERE IS SOMETHING SO COUNTER-CULTURAL IN THE GENTLENESS OF GOD.

So how do we embody this into our imitation of Jesus?

In Philippians 4:5 the invitation is for gentleness to be evident to all. In the Message this is put even more pragmatically; “Make it as clear as possible to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them, not against them”.

The picture of believers, individually and corporately, is of a gentle people who follow in the footsteps of their gentle Lord and master. This is not a gentleness that is naive or spineless but a gentleness that lives with principled firmness. Jesus was gentle but he was not a push-over. The challenge that gentleness presents to us is, therefore, a difficult one.

Dallas Willard observed that when Christians share their faith, we often appeal to reason, logic, and the truth of doctrine. But these tactics can often seem to be ineffective. A better approach to spread Christ’s word, Willard suggests, is to use the example of our own lives. To demonstrate Jesus’s message, we must be transformed people living out a life reflective of Jesus himself, a life of love, humility, and gentleness. This counter-cultural model of life—this gentleness—Willard argues, is the foundation for making the most compelling argument for Christianity, one that will convince others that there is something special about our faith and the Jesus we follow.

Willard called this “the allure of gentleness.” It’s actually the title of a book on this whole idea.

I know I have found lockdown to be challenging in a number of ways including with the balance of work and family life. I have had to catch myself being grumpy with my husband or impatient with my son, and instead try to practice

gentleness in my attention and responses to them. This has caused me to pause, take a breath and listen to what God is saying. To put my work down and give my full attention. I don't always get it right, but it is something I will continue to practice.

Another way of practising gentleness for me has been to take walk around my neighbourhood and notice the gentle signs of spring. The beautiful blossoms appearing, the fragrance in the air and the new growth on the trees. This work quietly happens all around us without us doing anything. Perhaps you could try this too? What could God be saying to you through his gentle yet at work creation?

Perhaps you could try finding a quiet place at home or in the sun and listen for God's gentle voice to speak to you. What is He whispering to you?

Maybe it could be in listening to a friend, can you practice gentleness in how you listen and empathise with them? And if you need to right a problem with someone, how might gentleness be a way to go about that? How can you serve them with receptivity and openness?

What would the church look like, or what would your home look like, or what would social media look like if we "make it as clear as possible to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them, not against them"?

May you realise the allure of God's gentleness.

With love,
Gabrielle.

BY ALISHA WISEMAN

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 3

10/10/21

Self-control

TO THE SAINTS OF CENTRAL VINEYARD

LAST WEEK, MY TWO DAUGHTERS aged 6 and 3 asked if they could have ice cream for breakfast. I quickly said no and proceeded to do that mum thing of over-explaining the importance of having healthy food for breakfast. Ever hopeful that even just a small piece of what I said would enter their minds and transformation would take place. After some more pestering, both girls finally relented and they begrudgingly went about eating healthier breakfast food.

Next minute my phone rang, so I left the room to take the call. I was gone for about 10–15 minutes. When I returned, I found both girls hovering over the now empty ice cream container with ice cream all over their hands and mouths (who needs spoons when you have hands) wearing awkward grins wondering if I would laugh or growl. Despite being told no to the ice cream they let their desires get the better of them and they indulged themselves accordingly.

Today I write about self-control.

Self-control ... I already feel like I can hear the internal sighs and groans from some of you. If you're like me, sometimes when I hear the term self-control, it can make me react. Something inside me stirs, an unrest starts to creep up in me because I know there are areas in my life where self-control is not as evident as I would like.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Paul listed this last in the list of spiritual fruit. Just like in the movies where the main villain is finally defeated at the end in an epic struggle and battle I wonder if Paul listed self-control last

because he knew it would be the hardest. For many of us, self-control tends to be one of the hardest fruit to exhibit. It's a fruit that requires us not to do what we may want to. While it may be the hardest, I'd suggest it's an essential fruit to nurture in order for us to exhibit the other fruit of the Spirit.

Think about it –

How can we be faithful to our spouses without self-control?

How can we be kind and gentle to others to those who don't seem deserving, without self-control?

How can we be people of peace during this time, when there is so much conflict around us, without self-control?

The Bible has a lot to say about self-control. Over and over again in Scripture, there are stories of people like Esau who sold his birthright because he was hungry, there was David with Bathsheba or Judas' relationship with money, where their poor decisions, their moments of weakness and lack of self-control led to disastrous consequences for their lives.

Proverbs 16:32 says: It is "better to have self-control than to conquer a city". Conquering a city during those times, was the hardest military achievement imaginable. Yet, here's Solomon, the wisest guy around, saying that controlling yourself is more impressive, more beneficial for us.

Before I go any further, we need to address and be aware of what Biblical self-control is and what it is not. There are many resources, many books and podcasts written about self-control. Many give us information on how to form better habits. Perhaps to give us a better body, to become healthier, to accumulate more money, to master our career and our emotions. While the

information may have some benefit, the self-control they discuss tends to be self-centred. Where the goal is to create a better version of yourself, for yourself. The problem with self-centred self-control is that it eventually leaves us feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

The monk Thomas Merton said, “People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

In response to this, In his book *Your Future Self Will Thank You* Drew Dyck said, “Before we start scaling the ladder, we have to find the right wall. And the right wall is not our-selves. Enough people have leaned their ladder against that flimsy façade, scaled to the top, and came crashing down hard.”

As Christians, we have a different definition, a different purpose for self-control. Yes, it involves self-regulating and sacrifices and delaying gratification but it isn't to improve ourselves, it is to glorify God in our lives and to serve others.

Jon Tyson said this about self-control: “Self-control is redirecting the passions in our heart towards Jesus and his kingdom for the sake of others to find life.”

Biblical self-control is ultimately about how we deal with our desires.

Ronald Rolheiser said, “There is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies at the centre of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, and in the deep recesses of the soul...spirituality is, ultimately, about what we

BIBLICAL SELF-CONTROL IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT
HOW WE DEAL WITH OUR DESIRES.

do with that desire”.

We live in a world where we don't know what to do with our desires. In our society today, control of our desires can be viewed as unnecessary, repressive and old fashioned. Self doesn't need to be controlled as much as it needs to be liberated and expressed. And we should pursue freedom by indulging in what we believe is good for us, to pursue what is in our heart and run towards our passions and what gives us the most happiness at the time. A common rhetoric is, “It's my life, I get to determine what is good, what is right and what matters for me.”

Scripture warns us about this in Proverbs 25:28: “A man without self control is like a city with broken-down walls.”

In the ancient world, people built massive walls around cities to protect them against hostile forces. This proverb points out that without self-control we render ourselves vulnerable to the enemy. Living life for ourselves, based solely on our own enjoyment, pleasure and what we deem to be good for our lives, may at the time feel great, but eventually, instead of being in control of our desires we become enslaved to them.

For me, I have a strong desire to be known and accepted amongst others.

While this is a common human desire, without control over it, I can find myself assigning too much value in how much or how little recognition or validation I receive from others. Rather than finding my acceptance and value in who I am in God I can look to others which is futile. Even in writing this talk, I need to ensure that I am not writing to try to impress, or to get people to accept me. Rather, I need to train myself by placing my desires in the rightful place.

The flip side of lacking self-control is legalism. This is where our response to experiencing goodness, passion and pleasure is one of fear and therefore control. This is where we try to repress and push down our desires. The problem is legalism shows little grace and love towards others and boils faith down to a list of dos and don'ts for ourselves and others. This is religion and Jesus was clear about how he felt about this when he addressed the Pharisees who epitomised religion and legalism.

The issue Jesus had with the Pharisees wasn't that they believed the law (so did Jesus), it was the way they practised and upheld it. They relied on external rules, practices and behaviour modification through guilt and shame to believe that this would change people's hearts. Their teaching and behaviour to others caused Jesus to say "Woe to you Pharisees" and warned his followers in Matthew 23, "So practise and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practise what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden." The Pharisees' teaching on self-control became a form of oppression and division amongst the people of God instead of a form of life and good news.

Self-control is an essential fruit that needs to be nurtured and grown not through religion and legalism but through the way of formation.

How do we develop self control?

Are we to be led by the Spirit, or should we be working on it ourselves?

I'd suggest the answer is *yes and yes*.

Self-control isn't self-reliance and at the same time, it isn't passivity, letting God's Spirit take over – "Jesus take the wheel" as the song goes. Self-control

HOW DO WE DEVELOP SELF-CONTROL?

ARE WE LEAD BY THE SPIRIT, OR SHOULD
WE BE WORKING ON IT OURSELVES?

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is developed through a combination of our own efforts and training and God's Spirit living within us, guiding us. We cannot do this alone, nor do we have to try. Like all fruit of the Spirit, self control is not a virtue on its own, it's a manifestation of love. Our connection, our relationship and our lived out experience with the love of God in our life is the foundation.

Self-control is about listening and obeying. It's not self-determined, it is surrendering our will to what God has taught us in His Word and in our conscience. While this sounds hard, teeth-gritting work, we discover self-control is like a muscle that grows as we use it and it gets stronger the more we use it. In a beautiful twist of irony, surrendering to God leads to our freedom. We find out that biblical self-control isn't commanded by a God who is wagging his finger at us, in order to restrain and confine us but it comes from a loving Father who ultimately wants and promises us freedom and flourishing.

Some pastoral encouragement for you today comes to you in three parts:

01 No matter who you are, what you've gone through or how old you are, your self-control can improve. If you're discouraged, remember the younger disciple Peter who struggled with impulse and self control. He had the right convictions but he couldn't follow through. For example, he seems to talk before he thinks, he quickly resorts to violence and chops off the ear of the soldier and he denies Jesus, after saying he won't, three times. However, 20 yrs later, he is the pillar of the church, he is the rock that Jesus saw in him.

Don't be ambitious and try to start with everything you would like to work on, start with one thing to focus on first. Walk humbly in knowing the reality of the fruit of the Spirit, is just like the fruit forming on a tree, it's a gradual process, it takes time.

02 Create environments that don't deplete your willpower. There is great wisdom when Jesus said "Run away from childish indulgences... refuse to get into inane discussions" (2 Timothy 2:22). The advice here is to avoid situations (when you can) where you need to resist temptations and exercise willpower. Interestingly, multiple research papers show us that all of us, even the seemingly strong and high capacity people only have a limited amount of willpower and the more we exercise it, and when we're tired, hungry, bored, lonely, the weaker it becomes. No wonder, so many of us are giving in to our temptations during lockdown.

03 When we fail (not if), we need to remind ourselves that we fall into grace and forgiveness of God. Often when we fail, we can beat ourselves up and label ourselves this and that. However, these labels are not what God would call us. When we change our ways and behaviour out of guilt and shame this is only effective for a temporary time. The Bible, as well as evidence-based research, teaches us that shame is a horrible foundation to stand on to enable change in our lives. We are to remind ourselves that God provides a fresh start for us every day, he encourages us to return home, to a Father who comes running to us with open arms.

Self-Control is love in training. What training is needed in your life today?

Is it training your tongue to speak well of others you disagree with or to talk less about yourself?

Is it training your spending habits, ensuring that you spend less on yourself so you have enough margin to be generous to others?

Is it training your work habits so you have time and energy to be present to those around you?

God invites us to participate in his kingdom by following Jesus' example of sacrificing himself for the sake of others. My prayer is that we would be reminded this week that we can be like Peter. As Drew Dyck wrote, "Peter was an ordinary person with a spotty track record of faithfulness. But as he walked with Jesus, he eventually became the person Jesus knew he could be. He grew. As we walk with Jesus, we will grow too."

Aroha nui,

Alisha.

SOME FINAL WORDS

BY DAN STEED

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF
DELTA OUTBREAK LEVEL 3

17 | 10 | 21

Afterword

OPENING READINGS

Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

Galatians 5:25 NLT

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.

Galatians 5:25 MSG

I, LIKE YOU, SPEND A LOT OF MY LIFE IN WORDS. I live my daily life rooted in the Scriptures and I spend a lot of my year writing sermons and talks sprouting out of those Scriptures. I check the news, a series of reports sent in headlines and paragraphs. I spend time in my day in concentrated conversation with God, trying to find words to speak to Him and listening to His words to me. I spend the day in conversation with people; chatting, texting or emailing. In between all of that, I am currently busy as a parent teaching my three year old how to correctly say the words in his ever-expanding vocabulary.

As we finish the series I am trying to write the afterword or another way to put that, *some final words*.

To know where we are finishing, it might be helpful to loop back to the start.

Be with, be like started as a sermon series to be preached in our church gatherings. But, when our most recent Covid-19 Delta lockdowns began, we made a deliberate choice not to preach sermons without gathering. Instead, we embraced another format of communication that was familiar to the Church; the sending of letters.

Whether it was the Apostles sending greetings to their recently formed house churches; or the Church Fathers sending correction to heretics denouncing Christ's incarnation or divinity; or Luther sending letters across Europe during the Reformation; or Bonhoeffer sending his prison letters in the Second World War. The writing-and-reading exchange has long been used by the Church as a valued form of communication.

So, we wrote. We exchanged our Sunday Gathering sermons to Sunday Epistles

sent to wherever you have been in lockdown. Our words written down and sent with love, prayer, thought and care, and we have hoped they may be received well.

Now I, like so many of you, have been on the receiving end of these weekly letters too. I wrote the first Sunday Epistle with my fellow pastors but since then have only written you mid-week letters about – for lack of a better phrase – the business of running this church during this time.

Admittedly, I did receive each Sunday Epistle earlier than the rest of you as I have changed from the role of “preacher” to “editor” in this season; collating the various letters and audio each week from each author, giving them an edit, a final sign off and loading them up to our various platforms for delivery to you all. Then on Sunday morning, I’d check everything had worked as it was meant to, and enjoy reading it all one more time for myself. In the physical receiving of these written letters each week, in the actual stopping and reading of them, I have woken up to a realisation:

Words play a larger part in our faith than I usually give credit to.

Come with me as we explore that a little more.

This series was grounded in some great words; mainly the two texts of John 15 and Galatians 5. John 15 is the recording of Jesus’ metaphorical picture of fruitfulness; that it takes a root system, a vine, and branches to bear fruit. We will only find fruitfulness in the Kingdom life by abiding in – or remaining grafted to – Him to bear what Jesus was rooted in.

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FAITH THAN I USUALLY GIVE CREDIT TO.

The Galatians text is Paul sketching out the new life in Christ. After describing what traits and actions come from a life detached from God and instead abiding in culture, he uses the analogy of fruitfulness to show what we are meant to be producing as life with the Spirit.

These two segments of Scripture are based in the core idea of fruitfulness and expand that idea in both rational truth and metaphorical imagination. I have loved sitting with these words for many months now, both before we started the series as a church but also during the series. These words are a gift that keep on giving the longer we consider them.

But in recent weeks it was not just the content, but the format that these words come to us in that has caught my attention. The format being that one is a gospel (John) and the other an epistle (Galatians). The former is the record of the good news of Christ – an evangel – and the latter is the writing of a pastor to his community via letter. Today these texts are two of dozens of literary styles found amongst our Bibles.

Scripture is a collection of words, written by many human hands, but all telling one unified story, inspired by God's Spirit and all of it is useful for teaching, correction and encouragement. They are words that are sacred. Words that are an authority in our Christian lives. Words that have divine meaning and ethical weight to them. But – and I'm not trying to be controversial or heretical here – John's gospel and Paul's letter wouldn't have been received in it's original and intended audience in this way because these writings weren't regarded as Scriptures to them, because they weren't Scripture *yet*. (We'll leave the details of that for another time...)

They were just writings with a message to listen to.

I think this dawned on me shortly after Natalie's Sunday Epistle was sent to us all. Here I was, having just read this heartfelt cared-for prayed-over labour-of-love letter from someone in our community writing to us all from afar, and it struck me: this is just as Paul would have done. And it was in this moment I realised that a piece of writing is both powerful and powerless at the same time. It's powerful because if the words are truly listened to, heard and received openly, they have the ability to change things in us. It's powerless because if we never opened the email, or read it half-thinking about something else, we don't absorb it properly and it changes nothing.

Everything we as a church have sent out during lockdown has felt like this weird mix of powerful yet powerless. We would be so excited about what we were sending and what was possible if we all "got it", and yet, we would be aware of the powerless reality that if no-one read it, nothing could come of it. The power is not just in the mind and hands of the one handling the words as the writer – it is also in the ears and heart of the listener.

Could it have been the same for the first-century audiences that found themselves reading some seemingly insignificant Johannine scroll recording the evangel of Jesus of Nazareth? Or what about those in Galatia as they read greetings from their old pastor? On the surface level they were just writings. It could all be so powerless if the audience didn't humbly open themselves up to hearing the words and listening to the message. I'm reminded of Jesus' often repeated phrase, "let those with ears to hear, hear." It's in listening with a receptivity to hear and understand that those words were transformed from just writings to something of revelation to the hearers.

We, as hearers, have an important job in our listening.

This thought has captured me this lockdown. How was I listening to these words? How do I listen to Scripture? Do I have the ears to hear that I hope I do?

So, in response, I chose to not let the rest of my lockdown be one where Scripture would be bouncing off me in powerlessness, but instead, received in power. I dedicated myself to a simple daily practise: over the next month I read the whole New Testament, allowing it to be powerful in my life by listening to it afresh. I read one letter or gospel a day, each in one sitting. Before each time of reading, I would take a deep breath, and as we do at a church gathering each Sunday when we stand for the reading of Scripture, I would say to myself as a half-prayer, half-command: “This is an authority in my life. I honour it with as much attention as I can give right now. God, come and speak to me through this word of yours.”

And then I would read.

And by read, I mechanically was reading words with my eyes. Taking in the symbols of letters, and the words and sentences into my brain. There, my interpretive abilities take place and my brain sorts out what words link to the meanings I have logged in my memory. My imagination would see the scenes playing out. My brain would be firing along nicely like yours is doing now. (It’s actually quite amazing to consider what’s happening right now as you read this, isn’t it?)

But also, I would try to listen below the surface of the text. I would try to

WHAT YOU ARE WITH, YOU BECOME LIKE.
WHO YOU ARE WITH, YOU BECOME LIKE.
SIMPLY PUT: BE WITH, BE LIKE.

understand what was unknown to me. I would try to enter into the larger arc of the story at play. I would find myself imagining things that without those words on that page I would not have been sitting there imagining. I would take the words at their own terms, without getting in the way too much, just letting them be the words they are. I would try to play out the scenarios further into our context, wondering what the life those words spoke of would look like lived today. I would find myself at the end not reading anymore, but praying the words to being. Lingering on words or sentences, I would start a dialogue with the Spirit. I took photos of a couple of bits that I wanted to go into deeper, some of which might even be sermons one day, but for now, they are for me to work out for me—and–myself. After the month, I had read the whole New Testament in this hybrid of half–reading, half–praying, and I have no other way to describe it other than I felt deeply and freshly nourished deep in my being.

All of this is part of spiritual reading. God spoke to me through the words of the New Testament during this month. I wonder. If we hadn't set out to write and read as a church, I wouldn't have encountered His speaking like this. Yes, I have other ways of listening to God each day, and those are all still practised, valid and important, but I would have missed this one.

Eugene Peterson, in *Eat This Book* speaks of how we aren't to just merely read the Scriptures as information, but as “a book to be experienced, savoured, dallied over.” He also says, “Reading is a gift, but only if the words are taken into the soul – eaten, chewed, gnawed, received in unhurried delight.” To be good readers of the Bible, we must learn to handle the content and the context. We must not just read to learn something (though this is important!) but to work the words into our lives to be lived. We must pray them and sing them. We must let them point out in us what they are saying to us.

He goes on to say a rather sobering warning to us as readers: “We don’t form our personal spiritual lives out of a random assemblage of favourite texts in combination with individual circumstances; we are formed by the Holy Spirit in accordance with the text of Holy Scripture. God does not put us in charge of forming our personal spiritualities. We grow in accordance with the revealed Word implanted in us by the Spirit.” As Peterson points out, our Christian belief is anchored not to just some texts, but to Scripture as an authoritative whole and the main event of its story: Jesus, the Word holding all things together. We must continually prioritise our listening to that Word with the Spirit.

In Galatians, after the list of the fruit of the Spirit, Paul encourages us to “follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.” Eugene Peterson paraphrased this in *The Message* to say, “Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.”

Are you listening to those words? *Really listening?*

This life with the Spirit, this way of being? Work it into. every. area. of. your. life.

This is where our series we have covered now suddenly arrives with full impact into the scene. This series has been seeking to help you be *with* God that you may become more like God – that you may get God “worked into every area of your life.” Big claim, but that is *actually* the heart of discipleship and spiritual formation. That is what it is to become fruitful. The image of fruitfulness and

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the list of fruit are a vision of life lived *with* Christ and as the best examples like Christ. It is the manifesto for Christianity. As has been famously said by Richard Foster: “The goal of the Christian life is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us!”

In closing, I want to encourage you to consider some final words, as in, what are your final words?

When you think about the end of your life, what words will describe you? What words do you want to be able to recount the life you’ve lived? Are they going to be words like: successful, powerful, important, confident, attractive? Maybe; fit, rich or sensitive. Maybe they are words like; lived an adventure, or smashed their goals, or lived true to themselves.

Or are they words like: loving, joyful and peaceful? Maybe descriptions from your closest like, “They were patient with everyone” and, “In suffering times they persevered in trusting God.” Perhaps traits like; kind and good to all. Or what about a boss or spouse or grandchild who might say, “They were faithful to their word. What they said they would do, they did.” What about if you were described as gentle and had spent every interaction showing that to all people, and you had stayed on the Way of Jesus like you resolved you would, no matter what came to tempt you or sway you?

See what is happening here? The fruit of the Spirit above could be just some words, or, they could be the vision of having worked God into your everyday life so much so that they become the life you lived. And you – and only you – hold the choice as to whether those words will be powerful or powerless in your life. The powerful One, who is the Word made flesh, has already written His love

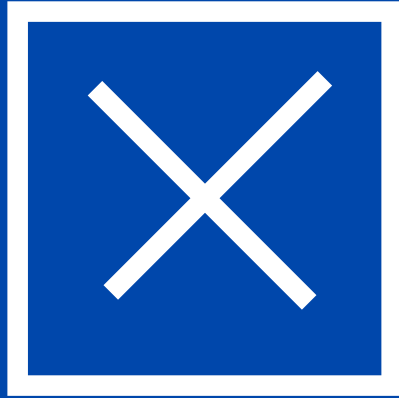
letter and sent it to you. Now, are you listening to its message? Do you want to live what He has sent and said? Will you allow him to “get heaven into you” by the Spirit He has now sent?

So, do business with this here and now and check you are hearing the message here. Check your intention. Are they just some words to you? Words you’re just leaving there in the Scriptures for another time and another day? Or, when you ask the question, “Who am I becoming?” – this all-important question of formation in the Way of Jesus – are the you imagining a life in the Way of the fruit of the Spirit? Are they your manifesto? Are you set on this goal of richly living a Spirit-drenched existence, of love experienced for yourself and exhibited in your everyday life to others?

Beloved saints of Central Vineyard, may we make fruitfulness our quest together. May it be our mind’s vision, our heart’s intention and may we co-labour to see fruitful things happen in our lives, our church and our city – in the love of the Father, the name of the Son and by the work of the mighty Holy Spirit.

And with that, those are some final words.

Shalom



CENTRAL
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