

28 October 2018



Bible Sunday

Readings:

Isaiah 55 vv1-11

2 Timothy 3v14 – 4v5

Gospel: John 5 vv36-47

We have come to the end of our sermon series on 'Being Mature' recently, and last week we had a baptism with the theme of maturity. This Sunday is Bible Sunday, and I thought it would be good to look at the theme of the bible as one of the ways we can become mature in the faith.

There is the story of a pastor who had dinner at the home of a couple in his church. After he left, the wife said to the husband, "I think he stole our spoon!" This bothered her for a while. A year later the couple had the pastor for dinner again. Unable to resist, the wife asked, "Did you steal our spoon last year?" The pastor replied, "No I put it inside your Bible."

Many of us as Christians know some of the bible, and we know some key texts like John 3:16 **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."**

And Romans 5:8 **"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."**

And Romans 8:28 **"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."**

In our sermon series, John Bourne talked about how he learned those sort of verses when in Sunday School/Crusaders, and how important it was to him in the 5 years he was in the Merchant Navy, without a regular church to belong to. These verses, and others like them sustained his Christian faith, and I am sure it is the same for many of you who learned things as children and teenagers and they are still part of you.

Last Tuesday, I had the privilege of hearing the biblical scholar Tom Wright speak- he is one of my heroes and I got 4 of his books signed-. The great thing about Tom is that he is not only a first class New Testament biblical theologian, but he puts his conclusions out linking them up to the broad sweep of Old Testament biblical story. Some scholars who have their own theories, but these theories seem to be disconnected from the rest of the biblical stories. Tom's conclusions, which are quite radical in their implications, have the advantage, in my opinion, to make sense within the context of the whole of the story the bible is telling. I came away from the seminar very stimulated and determined to read Tom's books again.

This is so important isn't it; to see ourselves as part of the biblical story, so we know where we have come from and the direction in which our Christian lives are going, for ourselves as individuals and as a part of a church and as part of a congregation. God wants us to 'Become Mature' and one of the main ways we are going to do this is to understand more and more of the purposes of God through our understanding of the bible's teaching. There are no short-cuts to maturity – as Jesus said in the parable of the sower

“But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.” (Luke 8:15)

Patient endurance with the word of God is called for; and we are all called to it, but whether we mature or not depends on our response to this call.

I want to speak today on our Isaiah 55 reading, but with reference to the other two readings

a) God's invitation

1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

The Lord is saying clearly to us all, put aside that which is not satisfying you and leading you not to grow in the faith, and spend time with me in bible reading and prayer. These things which distract us are not normally bad things in themselves, like the internet, mobile phones, television, family commitments, work, sports and hobbies etc. but they need to be put in their rightful place as we '**seek first the kingdom of God.**' What God gives is real spiritual food, given freely to us because of His love.

b) God's desire to share His heart with you

3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live

This like the mother or father wanting the children to come and listen to them and they impart some of their wisdom, and we need the right attitude of humble obedience to take advantage of this, and not that of a rebel who thinks they are about to be told off again. If we instead are willing to listen to those who know more than us and who have had more experience of God, then we will become teachable. “ timothy says this about the scriptures and Paul reminds Timothy about how he had come to know about God.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 4:14-15)

In this epistle we learn that Timothy had a godly grandmother Eunice and a godly mother Lois, (2 Tim 1:5) so Paul reminds Timothy that as he trusted them to teach Him, so now trust God to teach you more and more, through the scriptures

c) God's desire for your growth in ministry

3..I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

God says, to Isaiah's listeners, 'As I made a covenant, an unbreakable vow, with David to honour and bless Him and to show others something of the glory and purposes of God through His kingship, so I am choosing you to be a faithful witness to those around you, and you will learn what to do and what to say through your understanding of scripture. That is why it says in 2 Tim

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 4:16-17)

God will teach and train you, if you are willing to learn from scripture, which is god-breathed (inspired, the word for 'god-breathed' is 'pneumatos', which is where we get the word pneumatic from). Scripture will teach, train, rebuke, encourage and challenge you- you will not be the same after hearing it in the power of the spirit, because you will want to be more and more like Jesus.

d) Our response – Turning to God

"Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:6-9)

Our response is to stop relying on our own understanding – God's understanding is infinitely greater and he knows what is right for us. This is not to say that learning and thinking things out is wrong, it is not. But we have to understand that as humans we have a tendency to think that our own understanding is the right one and condemn others who think differently, whereas their perspective might have some truth that we need to hear. Only God sees it all as it really is, and so we have to realise that our thoughts are not his thoughts and our ways not His ways.

We have to humble ourselves and become like teachable children, not coming with fixed opinions wanting our own prejudices conformed. We must actively seek God seeking understanding, humbly admitting our pride and self-centredness which sometimes gets in the way. This is, in my view what causes disputes among Christians. Two views that are not in themselves wrong, in fact they have merit in their arguments, but one person insists that their way is right and the other person wrong and they are amazed that other people do not see things the same way as them. As the old music hall song goes, **“Two lovely black eyes, Oh what a surprise, only for telling a man he was wrong, two lovely black eyes!”** or as St. Augustine said, **“It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”** I never mind someone giving an opinion on a matter; what I mind is when they claim divine authority on a matter for which God has not given them permission to use His name. The absence of “In my humble opinion” in a statement on a controversial matter, especially with those who claim religious faith, is a sure sign to me that they are in danger of **‘taking the name of the Lord in vain’**.

Corrie Ten Boom used to tell the following story

When I saw Sadhu Sundar Singh in Europe, he had completed a tour around the world. People asked him, “Doesn't it do harm, you getting so much honour?” The Sadhu's answer was: "No. The donkey went into Jerusalem, and they put garments on the ground before him. He was not proud. He knew it was not done to honour him, but for Jesus, who was sitting on his back. When people honour me, I know it is not me, but the Lord, who does the job."

e) **Let God lead you and guide you in your Christian walk and ministry**

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

God knows the purposes he has for us, as individuals and as a church, and he gives us His word in the bible and in the preached word of God, to encourage us and train us, and to make us ready for the tasks he has for us. God speaks His words of life, just as He spoke and life came into this world when it was created, and life came into the world through His living Word Jesus. Water means that plants can grow, and His living word is like living water – remember the story of the woman at the well with Jesus' claim to give living water? In the same way God speaks His word into our hearts and wants it to accomplish His purposes, and all we have to do is receive it meditate on it and allow His word to do the work of change in us, so we are prepared for the good works He has for us. This is why immediately after this passage in 2 Timothy, Paul commissions Timothy to preach the word with boldness.

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. (2 Tim 4:1-2)

So the way to maturity involves being familiar with God’s word so that it becomes part of your very being.

- a) Listen to the invitation, an invitation of grace and love, come eat at no cost, all has been done for you if you can only accept it.
- b) Listen to God’s heart, His purposes for this world, and put aside your own prejudices and fixed opinions
- c) Let him tell you of His plans, and you respond by reading His word and becoming thoroughly familiar with Him, His ways, and especially with the teaching and mind-set of Jesus so you can grow in maturity
- d) Turn to God consciously, putting aside our pride and become humble and teachable.
- e) Let Him lead you and guide you throughout the ups and downs of our lives, knowing He is with you

If that sounds easy, believe me it is not, it is the work of a lifetime for we have to continually come to God for strength, in repentance and humble ourselves and commit ourselves again to following Him. As James says as **“Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. “(James 1:21)** But as we do so, more and more we will find that we want what God wants, and when we look back we will see that we have come a long way from where we were.

Do you want to be mature in the faith? Then there is no substitute for getting into the word of God. We will be singing this hymn shortly and I want to use its verses as a final prayer.

**Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As Thou didst break the bread beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee, Lord;
My spirit longs for Thee, Thou Living Word.**

**Thou art the Bread of Life, O Lord, to me,
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;
Give me to eat and live with Thee above;
Teach me to love Thy truth, for Thou art love.**

**O send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
That He may touch my eyes and make me see;
Show me the truth concealed within Thy Word,
And in Thy Book revealed, I see Thee, Lord.**

**Bless Thou the Bread of Life to me, to me,
As Thou didst bless the loaves by Galilee;
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall,
And I shall find my peace, my all in all.**