

Confidence

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Readings: Matthew 22. 1-14
Luke 23. 32-43

It's sad but true that even at the tender age of 54, coming up 55, I realize time is short. As many of you know, we are going to the UK in just over a week from now and then, if all works out, on to Ethiopia where Liz and I will be teaching in a school. We don't know when we'll be back, so now is the time to say what's really on my heart.

It's really upsetting to be leaving again. We will miss you all and think you are all wonderful. We really wish we didn't have to go. So you might well ask why are we going then?

By way of some sort of answer let me tell you about two young Ethiopians we know already.

Yeshe, came at about 18 years old to Sudan to work as a cleaner in the school where Liz was teaching. Both her parents had died and she came to Sudan because, believe it or not, you can earn slightly higher wages there than in Ethiopia and she needed to support her younger brothers and sisters. She used to clean Liz's classroom so Liz befriended her. Now she is back in Ethiopia and has already asked if she can come to cook and clean for us in Addis Ababa, from where she will be able to get back to see her family perhaps once a month rather than once a year from Sudan.

We met Minale on a brief holiday in Ethiopia. His father had already died and his mother has died since. He didn't have enough money to pay for an operation for her although it's uncertain whether that would have saved her. So like Yeshe at about 18 years old, he suddenly finds himself responsible for his younger siblings. His family lives on an island in the middle of Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile and he lives in a nearby town where he tries to scrape together a living and study at the same time. Every time he writes he finishes off with "Your Ethiopian son, Minale."

So our heart goes out to these young people and we don't know whether we'll be able to help them or how long we'll be able to stay, but we just hope we can help them put their hands in the hand of the Heavenly Father who alone can look after them in this very uncertain world.

So like many of you here, we'll just be helping look after some young people in the school and in the community, only unfortunately we'll be a bit further away.

The first passage we read this morning was the Parable of the Wedding Feast. It was a warning to the chief priests and Pharisees not to presume they had a place in God's kingdom. But it applies to us now because we are invited into God's kingdom. We are told God's kingdom is like a wedding and we've been invited to it. Only this invitation is not the first, it is the last. I understand in Jesus' day, when they held an important function they used to send out a first invitation, then when everything was cooked and prepared

which might take days, they would send out another invitation or message saying come now, all is prepared. And God is giving us this second invitation now. He is saying he has done everything, all is prepared, come now.

And like the men in this story, we can be busy with other things in this life, or say later, later, or say I'm just finishing this or that, a bit of DIY on the house perhaps, or just assume because we've had the first invitation for some time, that we can just roll up whenever we like.

But actually time is short for us all to respond to God's invitation. This is God's final call and it might be the last. I expect all of you have been to the airport and heard an announcement "final call for flight so and so, please proceed to gate 22" or like me you may have heard an announcement "final call for passenger Martin Ray, please go to gate 22 immediately!" That really puts the wind up you! And God in his mercy may repeat our final call, but this may be our last. Obviously none of us know when our lives will end and we will meet Him. We know this is a day of salvation. We cannot reckon on tomorrow (2 Cor 6.2)

And even if we could reckon on tomorrow, would we then be willing to respond? Sometimes people invest so much in possessions or particular thoughts, philosophies or habits of life they cling to them and will not change even when faced with death.

It may have been Hudson Taylor, or if not some other well known Christian who had this motto above his desk "As now, so then", in other words he was reminding himself that we will only be in the future what we are prepared to be now. The only way we can be sure we will be at that wedding feast in Heaven is if we respond to God's invitation now.

You see there were 2 criminals crucified with Jesus. Both saw Him and one was bitter and angry. He had no sorrow for his crimes, he just regretted being caught and wanted Jesus to do something magic, to change his circumstances but not him. Even with the certainty of death he did not repent.

What a contrast between him and the other criminal. The other recognized his guilt, recognized the justice of his punishment, accepted his circumstances, recognized the injustice of Jesus' punishment and cast himself on His mercy. And Jesus assured him he would be with Him in Paradise.

So let me ask you, have you cast yourself on the mercy of God to forgive all your sin? Because Jesus longs to forgive and that's why he said as they crucified him "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

I remember as a boy reading books about various heroes and explorers and my grandfather was one of my heroes. He had made great sacrifices for his country – he had been in the Royal Navy in both world wars and survived the sinking of his ship three times. But it was at a boys' camp in Wales in a tent under the light of a swinging hurricane lamp, that I first heard from a faithful Christian man how Jesus had died on the cross and that God is like Jesus. And it dawned on me that this wasn't a movie, this was reality. The God of all creation was not distant, cruel or random, but at the centre of His heart is sacrifice, mercy, love and forgiveness.

And coming back to the wedding, the only one garment that will do at this wedding feast is the forgiveness of Jesus, because there has never been another sacrifice good enough to take away our sins.

And if we have that garment we don't even need to try and slip in unnoticed, we can come with thankfulness but also confidence.

We can come with confidence because when Jesus died the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Mk 15.38), the veil that had always separated the children of Israel from the Holiest place in the Temple. God was showing us that Jesus had opened the way into His presence for us all.

So the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us

Heb 10. 19 "Therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us
.....let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith"

Some of you will know this hymn...

"No more veil, God bids me enter, by the new and living way –
not in trembling hope I venture, boldly I His call obey.
There with Him my God I meet, God upon the mercy seat."

Revelation has another picture where the people of God are not just guests at the wedding – we're pictured as the bride of Christ (e.g. Rev 21.2). And it might be strange for us men to think of ourselves as part of a bride, or for all of us to think of ourselves as a collective bride. But it's only a picture and the good news is that we will all be together with Jesus and there will be no more sadness of leaving. He will take care of us and nothing will ever be able to separate us. And He really will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death, sorrow, crying or pain. Isn't that wonderful in these days of uncertainty that there is something sure.

But are you ready for that wedding in Heaven? When Liz came up the aisle when we were married, her veil was removed and did she hang her head in shame and refuse to look up? No. Was her dress torn and dirty or did she look at me angrily? No. She was beautiful and her dress was perfect and she looked at me steadily with confidence and smiled because she knew that I loved her and she loved me.

And when you meet God face to face, what will you do?

Will you hang your head in shame and say you're not ready for this, you weren't expecting to meet Him so soon, will you look at Him in anger and blame Him for your lot in life, or will you be able to look at Him confident that He loves you and you love Him?

You see God wants us to have confidence as we come to Him, not a confidence in who we are or what we've done, but confidence in Him.

The other night as I was preparing Rupert asked me

"how's the preaching coming on Dad?"

I groaned and said "I don't know".

"Have confidence daddy", he said "what are you talking about?"

"Having confidence" I replied with another groan and then realized perhaps I should be practicing what I preach!

You know in the Old Testament the children of Israel (all the males) were circumcised as a sign of the covenant between them and God, and if they weren't they were not counted as one of His people, it was as serious as that (see e.g. Acts 15.1)

But in the New Testament Paul tells us that physical circumcision no longer counts for anything,

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation” (Gal 6.15),

and yet he talks of a new circumcision made without hands and he says

“For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3.3, also Col 2.11).

So NOW the people of God are those who have no confidence in the flesh that is their own natural abilities, but we can put all our confidence in Him who is so much more trustworthy.

Sometimes God has to help us in this by taking away our natural strength.

Remember Gideon facing the Midianites. God said there were too many in the army of the Israelites. Whoever heard of there being too many in an army? But Gideon needed to reduce their numbers from 32,000 to 300 (that is to only 1% of the original number) to defeat the Midianites. Otherwise they would have boasted that they had done it themselves. So it took that 99% reduction for them to lose confidence in themselves and put all their confidence in God.

And some of us don't give up trying to succeed on our own too easily either. I will tell you some of the ways I have tried.

As a young man when I tried to overcome sinful habits I found this –

as soon as I squashed one down over here, up popped another over there more serious than the first. And all the time I was focusing on myself and my sin, I think God was longing for me to come to Him and receive His Spirit because He knows that only by walking in the Spirit will we overcome sin.

Then I used to believe God had forgiven my sins but wasn't sure whether he could deal with the consequences. I imagined the consequences of my actions rippling out to other people and around the world forever, when God was wanting me to trust Him that He is the God of eternity and can take care of everything, and when He says He remembers our sins no more we should not keep reminding Him.

Or maybe you worry about decisions like shall I take this course at University or that one and will it change my life forever? There was a film called Sliding Doors which I haven't seen, but I understand the plot was something like this.... a young girl rushed onto a platform of the London Underground just in time to jump on a train before the sliding doors closed. It showed what happened in her life subsequently. But it also showed the different life she would have had, had she just missed the train and waited for the next one. And we can be paralysed in making decisions because we really don't know what is best or what will happen. And it's only when we put all our confidence in Him that we are released from this torture and can go forward and as it says in Proverbs we can trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding. In all our ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct our paths (Prov 3. 5-6).

Or maybe you are finding to your dismay you have some of the same bad characteristics and tendencies your parents had. Or that your children have the same problems as you had, and you say Lord is there no end to all this?

But the good news is that there is an end. When Jesus died he said “it is finished!” What was finished?

All the powers of darkness were united against him on the cross. But he didn’t save himself and come down off the cross. He perfectly fulfilled the will of the Father and took all our sin on himself, so He was totally victorious over every evil thing and he voluntarily committed His Spirit to the Father. And so the power of every curse, every inevitability that we repeat the sins and weaknesses of our fathers was finished, broken.

We used to sing a song to our children at Christmas – I will sing a song of love, perhaps you know it. It has a verse

“He a child in weakness came into this earth,
Vanquished Satan, broke our chains, gave our spirits birth”

One of our children used to get very excited at this verse and used to say

“daddy, daddy, daddy, when Jesus broke our chains, did he do it like this?” (as he gave a fierce karate chop). I said yes I thought he did. But since then I have thought even more, yes that expresses well how he did it. He cut completely through the chains of our inherited disposition to sinfulness.

The cross brings things to a complete end. The cross brought Jesus’ life to an end and God gave Him resurrection life. When we come to the cross, Jesus brings our life to an end and then He brings us to new birth by His Spirit.

We have a new heredity, the old is gone, and we can expect to develop all the characteristics of our Heavenly Father.

And it doesn’t matter if you’ve been bound for years or are where you are through your own fault. Samson was a man who had done great things for God but then through his own silly mistakes he found himself captured by the Philistines. His eyes were put out, he was bound and he was used as entertainment at the Philistine feasts. But he cried out to God and the strength of the Spirit returned to him and he achieved more in his final hour than in the rest of his life.

And when we turn to God we find Him true to all His promises. Remember Christian and Hopeful in Pilgrims’ Progress when they were caught by Giant Despair and put in the dungeon of Doubting Castle. They were there for three days and nights regretting their mistakes and all the consequences and, at the suggestion of the Giant, Christian was even considering suicide. But when they began to pray they realized that they had on them the key of God’s Promises which unlocked every lock in that castle and got them out.

So when God says “for sin shall not have dominion over you” (Rom 6.14) we can say Amen yes Lord I believe, and when he says “Be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5.18), we can say yes Lord, I receive, even me. We do not compare ourselves with others, because the promises of God are as good to me as to you, as to all of us. We simply trust the faithfulness of God.

And this Christian life might feel like walking on water, and if we look to our experience we know it's impossible. When Peter had got out of a boat every single time in the past he had gone straight down through the water. But when Jesus told him to come to Him and he put all his confidence in Him, he walked on the water. And all our experience might say to us, you've tried all this before and failed every time, but God is more trustworthy than our experience.

So let's resist the devil and stand in this confidence in God. And let's be ready to fight God's battles against the giants of despair and hopelessness in our own lives and those of others, because God needs men and women who put all their trust in Him to pull down strongholds. (2 Cor 10. 3-5, also Isa. 58.6 – see below).

David was just a shepherd boy untrained in warfare and ill-equipped, but he put his confidence in God and he killed a giant. He said of God "He teaches my hands to make war" (2 Sam 22.35). We trust the same God and He can teach our hands to make war too.

(Isa 58.6 Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?)