

## Growing up in Christ

So this morning we have been asking four people who are part of us, part of our community here at Leith, two seemingly simple but actually profound & life changing questions:

*How did you first come to know or experience Jesus as real in your life? and  
What are you doing to keep that relationship alive & growing?*

And what we've heard this morning is that we all come via different routes into this relationship with Jesus. Some people have been raised in families where Jesus was talked about & known & was central; or had somewhat religious backgrounds where they knew about Jesus, but still had to take that step of wanting to come to know Jesus personally, in a one on one kind of way.

My story is different again. I was an crusading atheist through my teen years, until in my 2nd year of University here at Otago I had a powerful, shattering, life-changing encounter with the risen Jesus.

It was an amazing time - exhilarating, confusing & I wasn't always wise in what I then said to friends & family about what I was experiencing, & what I thought they should do with their lives, as you can perhaps imagine.

And what I didn't fully grasp then, was that this was the beginning of a life-long journey of growth, of learning, of maturing - & that it doesn't all happen at once. I'm pretty sure that none of us, in those early days when we first start following Jesus, have any inkling of where it is going to lead us, & how adventurous & how hard the road ahead is going to be. I had no idea that shortly after that encounter I would feel lead to change from a potential academic pathway to go & train as a nurse, and then work in mental health. I had no idea it would lead me to, along with a friend, to move into a flat with half a dozen troubled teenagers, some of whom were referred to us by the police & by the courts, so we could mentor & develop life-skills together; & certainly I had no inkling when I was taking my first uncertain, stumbling mistake ridden steps of trying to follow Jesus - that soon I would meet this beautiful & intelligent young Medical Student called Susan & that together we would sense a call to marry & then leave everything we knew in NZ and spend the next 16 years of our lives in Cambodia, amongst the poor, using our health skills in a place that had just been devastated by horrific civil war and brutal genocide. Nor could I have imagined - back in those early, bumbling mistake ridden days when I first put my faith in Jesus & promised to try to follow him, that one day I'd be standing here, & doing this. In fact, I couldn't even have imagined standing here just two and a half years ago, when I was propped up on a bed down in the hospital getting blood transfusion after blood transfusion, and month after month of chemotherapy.

So there is one thing I feel really sure of my ground in saying about following Jesus - it is not boring, it is not predictable, & you have no way of knowing where in the world He will take you. You know, sometimes people who have decided they don't want to follow Jesus will tell you that their reason is that Christianity just sounds boring - you know, going to church all the time, singing old songs & reading ancient texts. Well my observation is this - yeah, religion is boring, even the Christian religion, but following Jesus is not. As we develop a real & authentic relationship with God, my experience & my observation of others is that this journey is an adventure and a challenge. At times exhilarating; at times scary; at times frustrating, at times enraging - I mean I've seen things to do with injustice & poverty & suffering — that have made me so so angry that I've wanted to hit someone or something (and I'm a committed pacifist!); & at other times it's been bewildering and confusing; & very often its been confronting - confronting stuff in me, in my heart & my mind - things that needed to change. This journey we go on with Jesus will be the hardest thing we'll ever do, and the best thing we'll ever do.

As we heard today, everybody starts from a different & unique place. There are some of us who were bought up in Christian families & homes, & went to church all our lives & actually can't remember a time when we didn't know about Jesus. And so, growing into a relationship with Jesus

for some is a gradual & gentle process, like learning to love & appreciate someone who's always been part of the family. For others, like me coming out of my atheist back ground, coming to know Jesus was much more of cataclysmic falling in love, but falling in love with someone you know you can never manipulate nor deceive. Someone who knows everything about you, including the secrets & the things you wish had never happened - & yet who still loves you to pieces. I really like how Shane Claiborne describes his conversion: he says - *'some people talk about how their lives were a mess, & then Jesus came & made everything so much easier for them ; for me it was the other way around - my life was easy, & then Jesus came along & messed everything up!'*

For me, at the beginning of my journey, that passage in Revelation 3:19 -20 was really, really important. It's a famous verse and you probably know it well - it's where the risen Christ says *" Those whom I love I rebuke and I discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and that person with me"*.

This word repent of course simply means to turn around & head in a new direction, to stop & change direction! Although - I have also heard the Hebrew translated as 'turn & go beyond your present thinking' - which is a pretty cool translation too.

But how cool is this, that the Creator of the Universe, he who overcame death & evil & all the forces of darkness, the one who healed the lame and the blind and fed the 5000 - how cool is it that this Jesus says to each one of us - *"I am knocking at your door, & if you hear me & open up to me, I will come into your life, & I will sit down with you & I'll eat with you & I'll talk with you, & we'll do life together"* - because in just about any culture I can think of, sitting down in a one on one with someone, at a table, is one of the most intimate soul to soul things you can do. But what does it mean when the most powerful person imaginable, the King of Kings, offers to sit & eat with us & do life with us? This reminds me of that verse in John 15:15 where Jesus says *'I no longer want to call you servants, but I want to all you friends, because I'm going to share with you everything the father has shared with me'* - how incredible is this, that the one who helped build the Universe, doesn't just want us to be his servants - but wants to be friends?

So that's where we start ; but then what? And I have to say I have been in evangelistic meetings & services that gave then impression that this was all there was to following Jesus & being Christian. You ask Jesus into your life, you get your sins forgiven, you book your place in heaven, & then that's it - it's all finished. All you have to do now is put your feet up & wait for Jesus to come back & take you home. And so then you end up filling in all your time reading end-times books and trying to work out who the antichrist is, & trying to work out what day to expect the 2nd Coming. No joke - that's what some Christians spend all their time doing!

But this is not what Jesus calls to be or to do. Opening our lives to Jesus is not the end of our journey, but the beginning, the 1st step on this great adventure of a life-time. It is a journey that will propel us outward, to serve & love a needy & broken world, & it is a journey that will simultaneously give us a centre in our selves, & a family to be part of, as we learn to live others & as we learn to let Jesus love us, change us, and transform us into the people he wants us to be - in to becoming the people we were created to be, destined to be, even from our mother's womb.

Let's look again at the two Scripture passages Phil read for us earlier:  
*Ephesians 4:11-16 (the Message Version)*

Well one of the 1st things I think Paul is saying here is that we are to be trained and blessed and challenged by our interactions with one another's gifts. He mentions here five gifts specifically (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor, Teacher), but of course there are dozens mentioned through the Bible. And if you are not sure yet what your particular gifts are, in the insert in today's newsletter there's a link for an on-line test you can do that will help you understand more about what those might be. Because the NT is clear - we are each to be using our gifts and talents to encourage one another, to build up one another, and in order to serve the world around us. And when we do, as this version puts it, two things will happen - 1stly we'll move rhythmically & gracefully with one

another; & 2ndly we will start to become mature adults, fully alive like Christ. And Paul is pretty insistent here isn't he - *No prolonged infancies & no eternal baby's please.*

In the 2nd verse we read from Galatians 4:19, the apostle Paul is just as blunt isn't he? He writes to his disciples in Galatia & he says *I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you*, & in fact he is somewhat perplexed because that Christ-like formations haven't been happening the way he hoped it would. And if you spend some time reading the rest of that letter to the Galatians, you find out that the main reason it isn't happening is because some legalists have come in & told these Galatians that they need to get circumcised & keep a whole bunch of other OT rules around Sabbath keeping & special ceremonies & its derailed them. Instead Paul urges them to return to where they started, in listening to & trusting God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus - to guide them & to lead them.

But here's the goal - *that Jesus be formed in us (individually & collectively)*. Not only are we trusting in & following Jesus; not only are we building a relationship with and learning to communicate with Jesus - but as we do so we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus & his image is being made more & more concrete & enfleshed in us. As it says in Romans 8:29 *Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the first among many believers (GNV).*

But how - how do we put ourselves in that place where God's Spirit can change us & we can become more & more like Jesus? Our transformation is always a work of God's Spirit - but we need to put our selves in a place where God can do that work in us.

As we've heard again today in our interviews, because we are all wired differently, the way God grows each of us is different too

Ben - through nature & being awed by his place in God's creation

Emily - social justice, the activism & upside-down approach to power that Jesus modelled.

John - by getting stuck in, by being an active doer, & pursuing God

Carol - worship, prayer, fellowship, listening & the gifts of the Spirit

Now far too often churches & preachers take a cookie-cutter approach to spiritual growth, & make statements like - YOU HAVE GOT TO BE READING YOUR BIBLE EVERYDAY, FOR THIS LONG & WITH THSI INTERPRETATION; YOU HAVE GOT TO BE PRAYING EVERYDAY, IN THIS WAY & FOR THIS LONG. Well we've already heard in our four interviews today, it's not that simple or that simplistic. Don't get me wrong - its a very important & necessary thing to be reading & studying the Scriptures, & to be praying - & I try to do that every day, mostly because I enjoy it - not because anybody's telling me "I have to". Although, because of the intense spiritual warfare we are all caught up in, part of me knows I do have to do it, whether I feel like it or not. But I also just plain enjoy spending time with Jesus. And each of us will have our own pattern or liturgy of how we spend time with Jesus - it'll be unique for each of us. For me, my pattern is this: I usually start by singing Psalm 51 back to God (esp. verses 10- to 13 - The Keith Green version :) - & I guess you could pick any song or Psalm, but for me this is a good one because it's crying out to God for cleansing, for forgiveness, for renewal & for empowerment - & I need that everyday. And then I start praying through the armour listed in Ephesians 6, because I am very aware of the spiritual battle we are all caught up in. And then I'll move into a time of quiet waiting on the Lord, mixed with intercession. & the onto reading my way through the Scriptures.

There is a chap called Gary Thomas, who has written a very helpful book called "Sacred Pathways" in which he identifies the nine main ways that most people find helpful for spiritual growth, for growing in their relationship with God, & this is what he lists:

1. **Nature** - Appreciating the beauty of God's creation.
2. **Enthusiastic Worship** - Celebrating God's goodness with thanks and praise.
3. **Learning** - Gaining insights about God and life with him (especially through the Scriptures)
4. **Tradition** - Following the time-honoured traditions and practices of God's people.

5. **Asceticism** - Abstaining from comforts to make more space for God.
  6. **Sensation** - Experiencing God with your physical senses or imagination.
  7. **Caregiving** - Offering God's compassion to those who are hurting or struggling.
  8. **Social Justice** - Actively engaging with others to serve the poor, needy or oppressed.
  9. **Contemplative Prayer** - Being absorbed with God in quiet solitude.
- <http://www.soulshpherd.org/2012/09/sacred-pathways-survey/>

So just look at the list now and have a think about which of these mean the most to you. But two things are clear to me out of this - one is the importance of each of us coming to know how we are wired, and what things are going to best help us grow - & then making space in our lives for those practices. And they are practices - we actually have to do them, & allow them to become patterns & shape us!

And the second thing is not to despise and look down on those who are wired differently from us, and don't demand that they be exactly like us & that they be nourished by the same kind of food that we are nourished by. We are all nourished by different foods. Don't spit on other people's food, just because they don't appeal to you!

So there's plenty to explore in here, & I'd really encourage you to do just that, both individually & in your small groups.

But I want to finish now, & I want to finish by once more reading that incredible invitation from Revelation 3:19-20: *"Those whom I love I rebuke and I discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and that person with me"*.

And this is an invitation, not just to people who are hearing of Jesus for the 1st time, but also to people who have been Christians for years, but have drifted away from their first love, their first passion for following Jesus. About five years ago, this very verse rekindled my walk with Jesus, which had grown a bit stale & a bit stalled, & a bit cold, I so I started meditating on this passage every day for weeks, inviting Jesus into deeper & deeper rooms & parts of my life that I had closed off - & I tell you what, it bought my faith & my relationship with him alive all over again, & passion returned, & love returned.

So after the final song, we will pause & pray - & I want to give you the opportunity to give your life back to Jesus, & to invite him to come in & work in you in a fresh way, in a new way.

But let's worship - Thanks Rod.