

Talk: Sunday 21 July 2024  
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Usually I love to dive straight into the gospel passage but today let's start with the Psalm. Psalm 23. It's so familiar that it's richness can pass us by.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.." Can we take these words seriously and apply them to our own lives?

It's a psalm about God's amazing provision for us

His care

His guidance

His protection in the midst of evil

His comfort in trouble

His goodness and love, always with us

His promise of eternal life with Him.

We could spend several weeks in this psalm alone.

I was struck by v5 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies"

God is present with us and preparing a celebration meal for us while at the same time we are surrounded by our enemies. Celebration as we face difficulties and opposition. God doesn't always make our problems disappear. But He is always with us in them.

Jesus, our good shepherd, knows the reality of our pain and struggles. Yet somehow when Jesus is around, which He always is, it's just that we aren't aware of it, we can find peace and maybe even joy in the midst of our troubles.

I've been reading a book by Dallas Willard titled "Life without Lack". It's about living in the fullness of Psalm 23.

One of the principles underlying this book is that, in the main, humans have the power to choose what we think about. He describes this as our ultimate freedom. By thinking he is referring to what our minds dwell on, our awareness, memories, perceptions and beliefs. He says "The focus of our thoughts significantly affects everything else that happens in life and evokes the feelings that frame our world and motivate our actions". It is interesting to note that this is the basic theory behind cognitive behavioural therapy. By directing our thoughts and choosing to practice different behaviours we will notice our feelings start to change. Fleur gave us examples last week where King David and Herod both chose to behave in ways that had negative consequences.

Our gospel reading is the bookends of Mark Chapter 6. At the beginning of the chapter we have one group of people who contrast sharply with those we find at the end of the chapter. The two groups of people think and behave differently and there are consequences to this.

The first group are listening to Jesus preach in the synagogue of his home town, Nazareth. Some were amazed by Jesus' wisdom but they assume because they were familiar with Jesus family background, may have observed him growing up, know his family, "he's only the builders son, he couldn't possibly, be from God" and therefore were

suspicious, unbelieving and even offended by Him. Their thoughts about what they think they know blocks any chance of faith. Jesus couldn't do any miracles there and was amazed by their lack of faith. A sad day for Jesus!

Fortunately the group of people at the other end of the chapter are very different. Jesus and the disciples are over the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is hot news! Here people are flocking to Jesus. They are trusting in His ability to heal to such a degree that they even wanted to touch the hem of His clothes. A very different attitude. Seeing and hearing about these miraculous events builds the faith of the people. If Jesus can do this for them maybe he'll do it for me too! What a contrast! Like the lady Gilly spoke of last month to whom Jesus says "Daughter, your faith has made you well". It's faith in Jesus that makes the difference.

We know that faith is not a commodity that we can acquire but a gift from God. However Jesus says faith small as a mustard seed can be enough. When we use the word faith we could equally use the word trust.

We live in a world where our faith, trust in Jesus is constantly challenged, even belittled. It's not surprising we have doubts and questions. What was it we were saying earlier about God being with us in the midst of trouble? To trust in this we need something to cling on to in tough times that is more substantial, more real to us than just something we have heard about. Ignatian spirituality speaks of "felt experience of God". (Actually sensing and feeling God in your body).

The people who met Jesus during His 3 years of public ministry experienced the sound of his voice, his smile, his touch, seeing with their own eyes the things He did, even experiencing His healing in their own bodies. Now that would have been life changing! But that was then what about now! Can we really trust that Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever(Heb13:8)?

If so, we can expect to experience Him here and now. Isn't this all part of what we mean when we talk about having a relationship with Jesus.

The New Testament repeatedly tells us Jesus by His spirit, the Holy Spirit, is with us now and will never leave us or forsake us. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom 8.39). We affirm this at the beginning of our service every Sunday.

"The Lord is here, His spirit is with us". But what's it like to actually feel the presence of God in our bodies?

Many of you may know exactly what I'm talking about and have experienced moments that you can't explain, of feeling something in your body, more than just a thought. A closeness, an image, a dream, something that leaves you knowing you've been touched by God. An experience of God's presence.

I was first aware of feeling the presence of God at New Wine. For some it's during prayer, when taking communion, reading scripture. We can't make these experiences happen, they are God's gift, but we can be open to them.

I've been privileged to hear stories from many people who can testify to this sort of experience, including some healing miracles.

These God given experiences are what builds our faith and trust in Jesus. Remembering them gives us hope when hard times hit.

If you think I've lost the plot and you haven't experienced anything like this, the question is would you like to? Being receptive is all the encouragement God needs! He is so much more willing to give than we are to receive. These experiences are much more common than we realise. Often we just don't recognise them. The more we focus our attention on Jesus the more we will be aware of His presence. This is what will enable us to proclaim it is possible to live a life lacking nothing. The presence of Jesus brings, love, peace, joy, contentment, a sense of freedom and connection. So that we can say:

"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever". Psalm 23:6

Amen.