

## ***living well* Sermon Series**

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

### **'Emotions and Relationships'**

*Play The Trogs or Wet Wet Wet – 'Love Is All Around' as Gospel processed back*

You could be forgiven for thinking we had gone back a month to Messy Valentines so much has been written, sung, made, said, all in the name of love that the resources are endless and our scripture passages today echo this theme. Human beings are obsessed with love but where does this obsession come from? St. John reminds us that it comes from God.

If God is a relationship of Father, Son and Spirit it makes sense that human beings were made for relationship too. When God made Adam, he saw that it was not good for him to be on his own - a sentiment probably echoed by any wife who has had to respond to man looking!

As well as being complex physically (only a Creator God could come up with villi in the small intestine) humans are immensely complicated emotionally. Picture the full range of feelings we experience from love to disgust, joy to sadness, anger to surprise. Most of us can navigate a rollercoaster ride over any given day, some more successfully than others. On top of this we react differently to different people and situations. A person might be a wife, mother, daughter, aunty, colleague, friend, pastor, carer, each role carrying with it a different way of responding and different expressions of love.

The question of *living well* with regards to our emotions and relationships is also a complex one but its undoubtedly a holy habit worth cultivating. God made us as whole people, in God's image. Ignoring any aspect of who we are as men and women made in God's likeness will inevitably result in disaster in our relationships with God, with others and with ourselves. To explore this topic further I am going to draw on the experiences and resources of Peter Scazzero in his immensely helpful book, 'Emotionally Heathy Spirituality' listed on the *living well* booklet. Alongside this some of you may be aware of research into faith development theories which suggest that many of us despite professing to be committed Christians, and our recent church survey suggested that 2/3 of people at Christ Church claim that, and have been so for over 20 years or more, we still might be little more than infants in our discipleship journey as we exhibit symptoms of emotionally unhealthy spirituality.

The purpose of *living well* is to move us all on in the depth of our faith. Attending a prayer retreat or adding 2 new spiritual disciplines to an already crowded life will not be enough - we need to revolutionize our following of Jesus in ways that will bring profound and lasting transformation of this community and individual lives. Scazzero believes the answer lies in joining emotional health and contemplative spirituality together.

When we launched this initiative, we did so with a health warning that it was not simply to be a booklet on a shelf or a marker in one's Bible. It is certainly not to be viewed as a list of things to do, new things to feel guilty about messing up. It was to provide a framework for a holistic Christ centered living that makes a difference in a modern consumerist society. Christianity is radically counter cultural and we need to resist getting sucked in to the predominant world view of our day which suggests that happiness is to be found in stuff, security is in money, power, status and good health, that there are no moral absolutes, and that you're not responsible for anyone but yourself.

Lent is a fabulous time for us to be assessing our emotions and relationships as we go deeper into the passion of the cross and experience new revelations of God's amazing love for each of us. Desiring or Knowing God is stage one of our mission statement as a church, but we also seek to be Growing and Going, becoming more Christ like and representing Christ in our local community and the other fellowships in which we find ourselves. Of course, a person can be emotionally healthy without Christ but if we integrate emotional health with contemplative spirituality we will find a powerful outworking of *living well*.

Contemplation has been described as the '*loving gaze that finds God everywhere.*' (Brother Lawrence). Awareness of and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our lives. We are first and foremost about God revealed in Christ. However, contemplation is not just about our relationship with God. It is ultimately about the way we see and treat people and the way we look at ourselves. Our relationship with God and relationships with others are 2 sides of the same coin. If our contemplation or 'loving union with God' does not result in loving union with people then it is as our first reading says so eloquently, not true. Moreover, it is about seeing God in all of life.

Emotional health, concerns itself primarily with loving others well. It connects us with our feelings and makes it possible to treat others with

respect as we acknowledge the divine spark in them also. For this reason, self-awareness, knowing what is going on inside of us is indispensable to emotional health and loving well. We cannot love another unless we first love ourselves.

Awareness of yourself and your relationship with God are intricately related. Some might find what we are talking about a bit 'touchy / feely' and find it uncomfortable. Nevertheless, we ignore our feelings at our peril. The wide range of emotions that I referred to at the beginning are all created by God so it also makes sense that God might use them to communicate with us as God does with the natural world, creative arts and other human messengers. Allowing ourselves to really feel the range of emotions however uncomfortable is a sign of emotional maturity or intelligence. The problem for many comes when we have a difficult feeling like anger or sadness. Unconsciously we rule against those feelings. We feel defective because we ought not to be feeling the 'wrong' things. We then lie to ourselves, sometimes convincing ourselves that we are not feeling anything because we don't think we should, and we shut down our humanity. One of the greatest obstacles in knowing God is our own lack of self-knowledge. So, we end up wearing a mask – before God, ourselves and other people.

Some years ago, I experienced quite a difficult time. Craig was made redundant, a close friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and my colleague left leaving me to run two churches, train a Curate and establish a United Benefice. The pain of grief coupled with overwork, stress and responsibility, alongside financial strain and other personal issues eventually became overwhelming, but I still told everyone 'I was fine'. I think it was obvious to all who loved me that I was anything but, however I denied it. When I finally acknowledged that I was not fine and asked for some time out to sort my head, got some counselling and went on retreat, I began to appreciate that burying my feelings rather than confronting them had contributed to my sense of life spiraling out of control.

Without this profoundly intense but life changing episode I couldn't be where I am today. As one friend succinctly put it 'I had to climb the mountain before I could see the view!' Getting to your core requires following God into the unknown, into a relationship with Christ that turns your present spirituality upside down. This is an undeniably difficult spiritual discipline to nurture. At the same time the God of the universe invites us to abide in him.

Living and loving well is the goal of the Christian. It requires that we grow into emotional adulthood in Christ, the rewards of which are rich beyond all measure. It involves us putting what we believe into practice. Such as being quick to hear and slow to speak; speaking the truth in love; not bearing false witness against our neighbours; getting rid of bitterness, rage and envy. Living and loving well is the essence of true spirituality. It demonstrates connectedness with God, ourselves, and others. God invites us to practice his presence in our daily lives. At the same time, he invites us to practice the presence of people within an awareness of his presence, in our daily relationships. This was encapsulated in Jesus' summary of the faith in Matthew 22:37-40 "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*' *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"

How might we practice becoming more emotionally healthy? I have found journaling helpful and using my recorded thoughts and feelings as a starting point for prayer. It is quite amazing what new insights about myself God has revealed. It's also helpful to re-read what I have written to see how I have grown over time.

I appreciate that most people have incredibly full lives but the simple holy habits listed (slide) just might change your life as mine has been. With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit this is possible for any of us irrespective of how long we have been a Christian for. It is immensely liberating to realise your life is not your own but God's, and the freedom and joy of living a Christ centered life opens us up to endless possibilities. Peter Scazzero believes, and I agree with him that one of the greatest gifts we can give our world is to be a community of emotionally healthy adults who love well. This will take the power of God and a commitment to learn, grow, and break with unhealthy destructive patterns that go back generations in our families and cultures. Jesus didn't choose his disciples because they were perfectly worked out individuals, each had their own personalities and flaws but God used them in the building up of his kingdom and he can do the same with us if we are willing.

Let us pray,  
*Loving God, lead me to a greater vision of who you are,  
and in so doing, may I see myself – the good, the bad and the ugly.  
Grant me courage to follow you,*

*to be faithful to become the unique person you have created me to be.  
Amen.*