

Close up and Personal

7th February 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

1 John 3:1-3

Psalm 139:1-10

John 15:1-17

People can be very inconsistent in both how they view God, and how they relate to God:

- A beautiful sunset in a spectacular setting will put us in mind of God's creative genius, and make us wonder at his goodness.
- A violent storm may make us aware more of God's awesome power, and cause us to tremble at his might.
- The recent devastation of Haiti by that terrible earthquake may cause us to question God's justice and mercy, and even to doubt his goodness.
- A good outcome from a brush with cancer may give us reason to be thankful for God's mercy and love, and give us a renewed commitment to his service.
- The unexpected or untimely death of a loved one may make us feel that life and death is arbitrary, and that God doesn't really care.
- The birth of a new baby reminds us that God is both the creator and the sustainer of life, and make us feel humble in his presence.

None of these responses are unreasonable. Our experiences of life and our experiences of God are many and varied. Sometimes we find it easy to see God at work and to delight in his goodness ... sometimes we find it hard to understand what God is up to, and our faith may wobble as it is put under pressure.

But we do need to recognise that much of our response to God is based on our feelings, rather than on facts. We are so susceptible to being swayed by the ups and downs of life, that we need to develop an understanding based more on how God has revealed himself to us, than on our own emotional responses to our situations and circumstances.

God is too complex ... too amazing ... too powerful ... too far beyond our comprehension to put in a box or define. As we read in the prophet Isaiah (55:8f):

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

If you've ever wondered, when we sing the hymn: "Crown him with many crowns", what we mean by these words:

"Crown him the Lord of Years, the Potentate of time,
Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime!"

... then this is it! The dictionary defines the word 'ineffable' is:

"unutterable; too great for description in words; that which must not be uttered"

So here we have something of a paradox. God is, by definition, entirely 'other' ... so far above and beyond us that we can never presume to understand him – *ineffable*. And yet, having said all that, the fact remains that God comes to us in relationship, and that

relationship is a personal one. It is not a matter of 'God out there' but of 'God in here.'

Let me read for you the first half of Psalm 139 (verses 1-12)

We sang this morning "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden. Think about that for a moment!

How easily we use that word 'almighty', almost as a title - "Almighty God" - without really considering what it means.

What an incredible thing it is that God, who is literally 'almighty', chooses to live in personal relationship with us ... not just with 'humanity' in the general sense, but with each one of us as individuals. The creator and sustainer of the universe wants to get "Close up and personal" with you and me.

In John 15 Jesus talks about this in terms of a vine and its branches. It's the wrong time of year to lop off a chunk of the vine from the Vicarage garden and bring it in, but if I had you might ask yourself "Where's the join?" That is to say ... where does 'the vine' end and 'a branch' begin? Surely they are all a part of the whole.

So, when Jesus says: "Remain in me", he is not talking about us hanging on to him by the skin of our teeth, but rather being totally integrated in him. The branch that is fully attached and drawing nourishment from the vine will be healthy and fruitful ... but if it becomes damaged and detached, it will fail to prosper and will not bear much fruit.

Jesus says that those who 'remain in him' will be fruitful ... but what does that mean? A fruitful vine is one which produces plenty of grapes ... but what is a fruitful Christian? How are we to measure our effectiveness as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ?

I think there are two ways in which we can look at this ... or two questions we can ask ourselves. The first is "What difference are we making for God?" and the second is "What difference is God making in us?" Neither of these are things we can easily quantify.

A Christian who is fruitful is one who is making some impact for the Kingdom of God ... whether that is showing the love of God to others through good deeds and kind words, and so bringing something of the light and love of God into the lives of other people ... or through so effectively sharing the Good News that others are coming to faith in Jesus through their testimony.

But we are not in a competition, and we must beware of counting scalps. One person may have a particular gift of telling strangers about Jesus and bringing them quickly to faith ... while another may spend years quietly nurturing a relationship in order to open up one other person to the love and forgiveness of God ... and yet another may by their words and actions plant seeds of renewal in the lives of many others which may not be harvested for years to come, not even in their own lifetime. Each one is following God's command to be witnesses, and each one is fruitful.

A Christian who is fruitful is also someone in whom God is working by his Holy Spirit to change them, and grow them more in the likeness of Jesus. Paul tells us in Galatians 5 that:

"... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

We must expect to see such things growing in the life of every true disciple. If God is at work in us by his Spirit, then we will be changed to become more like Jesus. No amount

of hard work or dedicated witnessing will count for anything unless Jesus can be seen in us.

So Jesus calls us to fruitfulness, but not by our own effort of will. If we remain in him ... firmly established or deeply rooted in him ... living in intimate relationship with him ... then we will be fruitful Christians, the Father will be glorified, we will know what it is to be loved, and we will experience the joy which God intends for us.

So many Christians fail to experience joy, because they try to operate in their own strength, instead of in God's strength. Then they struggle when things go wrong, or life is hard ... they blame one-another instead of loving one-another, and they suffer from disillusionment and disappointment. Jesus calls us instead to live obedient lives as his disciples, serving God and loving one-another, and experiencing his joy as fruitful disciples. Much hangs on that greatest of commandments (John 15:12):

"Love each other as I have loved you."

In 1 John 3 John reminds us just how great that love is:

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!"

Just ponder that for a moment, and let it sink in to your being ... Children of God!

The Father has *lavished* his love on us. The word 'lavished' puts me in mind of an exotic ice-cream sundae on which someone has gone over-the-top with butterscotch sauce – but fill in your own preferred image here! It suggests extravagant opulence ... love dished out in unnecessarily large dollops ... generous to a fault.

This is the kind of love that God the Father has for you ... so much so that he takes hold of all those who will open their lives to him, and through Jesus, calls us his children. "And that is what we are!"

It is sadly true that many people's experience of fatherhood is less than perfect. More fathers than we like to admit are neglectful, abusive, absent or unloving. Even those of us who try to be decent fathers are aware that we often fail to be all that we would hope to be, and there are times when we let our children down.

But all of us have an idea of what a father *ought* to be ... and God the Father is all this and more. Our Father God is attentive, kind, generous and loving ... and he is always there for us, and never lets us down. Our Father wants us to live in a relationship with him which is personal and intimate, in which he can shower his abundant love upon us.

But we have choices to make ... to receive his love or to push it aside. In order to benefit from this love of the Father, we need to do no less than with our human fathers:

- We need to spend time in his presence.
- We need to learn from his wisdom.
- We need to ask his advice and listen to his guidance.
- We need to put into practice the things that he teaches us.
- We need to imitate the life that he lives.

Now, already, we are children of God ... and what God has in store for us has not yet been revealed. It is beyond description, except in this one thing – that we shall be like him!

The work of the Holy Spirit now is to grow the fruit of the Spirit in our lives; so that we can become more like Jesus now ... but then ... *then* ... we will be like him! If we really want to grow more Christ like, then we will welcome and embrace the intimate, "Close up and personal" relationship which God offers us, which we read about in Psalm 139.

God's knowledge of us is intimate and total. We come back to that prayer again:

"Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden"

Open hearts ... desires known ... no hidden secrets.

There is nothing to be known about you that God doesn't already know. There are no hidden thoughts or dark secrets which are secret to him, however effectively you may have hidden them from even your nearest and dearest. There are no mental images he has not seen, or deep longings he has not noticed. You are an open book to God.

"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me" says the Psalmist ... *"you perceive my thoughts from afar ... before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord."*

Comforting? ... or Terrifying?

We might consider it intrusive, this intimate knowledge of our inmost being ... 'There is no escape from God' ... and in a sense it is true. We cannot hide our thoughts, attitudes and actions from him. The Psalmist says: *"You hem me in."*

You could see this as being trapped ... restricted ... constrained ... but the Psalmist says:

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." (Psalm 139:6)

It is a wonderful thing to be intimately known by God ... because as well as being known, we are deeply loved. God may look upon us and see everything ... none of our darkness and weaknesses are hidden from him ... and yet he looks upon us and loves us.

Why is that? ... because he sees us through the filter of forgiveness, as those who have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ and received new life in him. So, instead of reading Psalm 139 as "There's no escape from God", read it instead as an affirmation of his amazing love.

Consider the father of a young child setting limits for his safety. He makes the garden fence secure, not to prevent the child from having fun, but to save him from running out into the road and getting hurt. Not entrapment, but protection.

God keeps an eye on his children because he is motivated by love ... so there is nowhere we may go, no situation too desperate ... no circumstances so grim ... that God is not there – loving, protecting, guarding. As the Psalmist writes: *"Your right hand will hold me fast."*

Of course this relates very practically to this morning at a service of Prayer and Anointing... when we are invited to come and bring our needs to God in a more "Close up and personal" way than perhaps we usually do ... and to do that in the context of

drawing close to God in receiving Holy Communion.

It doesn't matter whether it is a matter of physical, emotional or spiritual need ... or of circumstances which are overwhelming us ... or just a need of God's fresh touch on our lives ... we are invited to come to our loving Father who wants to get "Close up and personal" with his children ... because he loves us.

Video: Music and Words of Psalm 139:1-12