

My Heart, His Throne – Part II

Paul Williams Sunday 27 April 2008

Would anyone like to take a guess as to what this is? (*pointing to a young sapling sitting in a pot at the front of church*)

It's an Oak Tree. If I asked you to picture in your mind an Oak Tree you would have probably have imagined something that looked more like this...(*pointing to a full grown Oak on the projection screen*)

Strong, enduring, majestic, spreading its firm reach in every direction, ancient yet bursting with new life, providing shelter for animals, birds and the occasional traveller caught in the rain or the mid-day sun. And that tree is in fact likely to be more than 400 years old.

Well, during the next week I'm going to replant this tree and God willing if it gets a good start one day it might look like that – ...however, unless medical science takes a quantum leap forward I will not be on earth to see it looking like that – neither will my children or my grandchildren and perhaps not even their grandchildren. My part in this tree's story is to make sure it gets planted at the right time, in the right place, where its roots can go deep into good soil.

In Isaiah 61 and verse 3 the prophet says this about the redeemed people of God,
“They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.”

The Bible says, that is what we are if we belong to Christ – we are like an oak that has been planted by the Lord himself for the display of his splendour. When you find yourself wondering what the Christian life is really all about – especially when times are hard and when things go wrong – what an amazing thing to know that God looks at you and says *‘You are an oak of righteousness, and I planted you in order to display my glory.’*

Of course this is also God's great purpose for the church, as the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, God's eternal plan is that **“the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”**

The church of Jesus Christ: strong, enduring, majestic, spreading its firm reach in every direction, ancient yet bursting with new life, providing shelter for the poor and the oppressed, a home for spiritually weary and hungry people.

Well, if this is God's plan for you and me and for his church then the only thing that matters is 'what will help us to grow from this young sapling towards the full maturity of this great oak?' And this isn't about how long we've been a Christian, or how well we know our bibles, or how involved we are around St James. Because God always looks beyond our outward appearance and searches our hearts – just as he did with David. And that's why Samuel passed over all seven older (and more experienced and apparently stronger and wiser) brothers. And that's why the entire village stood there waiting for a young boy to be fetched in from the fields, because **‘God does not look on the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks on the heart.’** (1 Samuel 16:7)

In the story of the people of God David stands out as a mighty oak of righteousness – he had a heart that was *wildly abandoned to God* and yet also *deeply reflective* on the goodness of God. That's what we explored last Sunday – you can get hold of the CD if you missed out.

David wasn't a perfect king. Only one king on earth had that reputation, and in God's plan he happened to be great David's greater son, our Saviour Jesus.

But even when David messed things up badly his heart was conditioned in such a way that his prayer, recorded in Psalm 51, forms the most profound expression of confession and repentance ever recorded in the Bible.

So what was it about David's heart, his inner life, that caused him to grow from sapling to mighty oak, and how do we actually cultivate a heart that is wildly abandoned to God and yet deeply reflective on his goodness? Because you and I were planted by God for this purpose – and **this is why the church exists: to display his splendour.**

I want to point us to one verse in Psalm 86 that goes some way to explaining how David cultivated an inner life of such depth and beauty. There are many other verses we could look at that express the same truth, but this verse is profoundly simple and deeply practical. In Psalm 86:11 David prays:

**“Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth;
Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.”**

David was not perfect – but in every area of his life, in his work and his worship, in his struggles and his temptations, and in his joys and sorrows he had this one ambition – to live each day in single-minded and joyful devotion to God. **‘Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.’**

I rather like the way the old prayer book translates this verse, *‘O knit my heart unto thee that I may fear thy name.’* David's desire was that his heart should be woven into the heart of God himself.

This is a Vision Sunday for us at St James, and as we've already seen earlier in the service there's so much to give thanks to God for. We are not short of strategic vision, there are many doors open to us in this community and way beyond to shine the light of Christ, we're a very gifted church, we're blessed with resources, with people who have a passion for many different areas of ministry and mission, and month by month the Lord is adding to our number children, teenagers and adults who are coming to faith.

But when God looks at the two St James, when he looks at our own lives, he doesn't count our achievements, and measure our success – each morning we wake up and begin a new day his first concern is the condition of our hearts towards him, and how we will display his splendour through all that day holds.

**“Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth;
Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.”**

For anyone who aspires to have an undivided heart like David I want to encourage you to reflect on three questions that might form something of a spiritual heart-check for you this morning.

The first question is this:

To what extent is your heart fully surrendered to Jesus?

Now that may be a difficult question to answer, after all what does it mean to be surrendered to God. Does being a Christian, believing that Jesus died and rose again, mean that I am in some sense already surrendered to him? Well, it certainly means that you're loved by God and eternally safe in his hands, but many Christians can still find themselves living life with Christ on the fringes and themselves on the throne. And all of us face this daily struggle.

Dallas Willard in his book *'Renovation of the Heart'* describes the condition of a divided heart as one *"that is chaotically wavering and confused, the playing field of pride and fear, shrouded in layer upon layer of destructive habits."*

And most of us will have experienced seasons of life, even as Christians, when that would be an uncomfortably familiar description of our hearts before God.

And if we took some time out each of us could make an assessment of the extent to which that definition might ring true for us at the moment – some of you know it does.

Jesus' call on our lives is an invitation to surrender ourselves fully to him. Dallas Willard continues:

"Those who are not genuinely convinced that the only real bargain in life is surrendering themselves to Jesus, abandoning all they love to him, cannot learn the other lessons Jesus has to teach."

This issue of surrender leads to a second diagnostic question: **Just how deep is your desire to display the splendour of Jesus?**

George Mueller of Bristol was one of the great Christian leaders of social change during the 19th century, especially with his pioneering work among orphaned and abandoned children. All through his life he took significant personal and financial risks because of his faith in Christ and his determination to make a difference to the plight of the most helpless. And on one occasion he wrote this:

"There was a day when I died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends, and since then, I have studied only to show myself 'approved unto God.'

Somebody once said of George Mueller that he had the 23rd Pslam written on his face. What's written on your face? What glorious biblical truth do we display to the people around us, to the world in its need?

Whether it's in our workplace, or in the family, in friendships, or through the way we share our resources with those in need, or in our obedience to go wherever God leads us – how much do we seek to put the full splendour of Jesus on display?

One final question to consider:

How are you feeding and nurturing your soul on a daily basis?

Anyone who's embarked on orientation will know that your success in reaching the right destination is dependent on ensuring that you keep your compass pointing in the right direction. Spiritually speaking we need to refocus the compass bearing of our heart every new day – so that whatever's coming up, whatever we're facing, we know that our heart is pointing towards Christ.

The hymn writer John Newton expressed this aspiration so eloquently in a prayer that's been with me these past few months:

More of presence, Lord, impart,
More of your image, let me bear
Erect a throne within me heart
And reign without a rival there

If we truly desire to live each day with an undivided heart so that we can continue to grow and display more of God's splendour then we need to feed and nurture our soul – just as this young Oak needs to remain firmly rooted in good soil. And that's all about spending time in prayer and

reading God's word – on one level it's very simple, and yet it can be incredibly challenging building good patterns into our daily routine.

That's why with the help of my friend Jon Wilcox we've prepared a prayer card, called 'My Heart, His Throne.'

One of the strategic goals we set for ourselves as a church back in September was to explore what it might mean for us to create a house of prayer within the two St James.

The House of Prayer in OT times was first a tent and then a Temple in Jerusalem – the place of God's presence. But through Christ we no longer need to go to a special place.

The Holy Spirit of God is present with us at every moment and in every place. Jesus said that through him we've become living temples – we are the house of prayer.

And for that reason In Colossians 4 verse 2 Paul says

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

If we can encourage one another across the whole church family towards some daily routine of prayer and bible reading (including children and young people) we will have over 900 houses of prayer active in this community and beyond. What an awesome thought! If that really were to happen only heaven knows what the impact might be on our lives and on this area, and on our nation.

So I'd encourage you to take one of these cards with you (you can also take some for others if you think they'd appreciate it). If you already have a pattern of daily prayer then I hope this will be an encouragement not an alternative. But if, like most of us, you often struggle to find time to be alone with God then I hope this will be a resource that leads you to a new place of daily communion with your Father in heaven.

And remember we can pray any time and any where – it's probably best to set some time aside at the beginning of the day. This could be before breakfast, or on the train into work, or after the school run, or at some other regular time that will work well for you. The pattern suggested here, using some of the prayers, could take ten minutes or extend for up to an hour – it's flexible and allows lots of room for creativity. But the best part of all is this: that as we learn more about the adventure of prayer we get to share the joy and the wonder of growing to maturity in Christ – no longer a sapling blown around in the wind, but solid oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.