

Synod Sunday Sermon

15th August 2009

¹¹*My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other.*

¹⁵*Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God's Son participates continuously in an intimate relationship with God. ¹⁶We know it so well, we've embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God. God is love.*

When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. ¹⁷This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

²⁰*If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? ²¹ We have this command from Christ. Loving God includes loving people.*

1 John 4:11, 15-21 (The Message)

My sister in law recently sent me a set of photos from the internet which had young babies in various cute poses with pets. A baby lying on a Labrador; a cat and a baby girl intently watching a fish in a goldfish bowl (probably with quite different intentions); various pictures of dogs kissing or licking babies and vice versa. All so cute and all of which made me feel quite warm and fuzzy especially because I have a 15 month old grandson (and a dog). They were cute and touching and I could see in the picture the relationship between the babies and their pets.

Pictures and images and stories about relationships do touch us because relationships are so important to us. In fact they are vital to us and our existence.

God has created us into and for relationships. Without them we are not truly human and through them we actually attain and enhance our humanity.

Take a moment now to think of three relationships that are important to you. ...

Why are they important to you?

What would your life be like if you didn't have them anymore?

Take another moment to consider all the relationships that you have in your lives. Your spouse or partner or girlfriend or boyfriend; your family; people you work with; your social contacts; the people you interact with through sport or hobbies; your neighbours; your friends; the people around you this morning – your church family; and the list could go on and on.

It's amazing the number of relationships we have in our lives, and it's amazing what a rich tapestry these people bring to us. Or perhaps I should say what a rich tapestry **God** provides for us through these many relationships.

Unfortunately, as important as these relationships are for us they are not always wonderful. They are not always positive. They are not always peaceful. There are times of conflict and bad will in even the best of our relationships.

You can probably all think of times when you have been annoyed at someone, maybe even wishing they would leave, or you feeling like you wanted to leave the relationship. (You might even be thinking that way right now)

The Bible has a way of expressing that. It talks about the effect of Sin. Sometimes those conflicts and lack of peace occur because the world we live in is not in harmony and certainly not in harmony with God's will and this lack of harmony or unity can affect our relationships.

And sometimes those conflicts happen because of something or things that we have done to each other. And often that is because we were self focussed, and did not consider the other person or their feelings or needs.

If that happens then the next thing that can develop is that we start to focus on the negative things about them. And then before we know it we start to imagine all the terrible things they are thinking about us! And then we really take notice of all those little things they do just to annoy us.

Does any of that sound familiar?

I love the story in Genesis 3 about what happened after the first sin.

Straight after they had eaten the fruit from the tree which had been forbidden Genesis says *They were given understanding and realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and covered themselves.*

That evening they heard the Lord God walking in the garden and they hid from him among the trees. But the Lord God called out to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you because I was naked."

"Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. "Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to eat?"

The man answered, "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

The Lord God asked the woman, "Why did you do this?"

She replied, "The snake tricked me into eating it."

It happened back then and it's still happening today. The relationships in the Garden of Eden were ruined by that sin and today sin is still affecting our relationships.

And the way we react is still the same too isn't it. Just like Adam and Eve we hide. We cover our backsides and we blame others. (Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake and the snake didn't have a leg to stand on. Sorry, I know it is an old joke!! But I still love it.) Adam in fact actually blames God "the woman **you** put here with me"

Our relationships are not always perfect, but they are still important, in fact vital to us because God has created them for us and us in them. As we have seen the Bible explains why our relationships are not always good – SIN. And the Bible also tells us how our relationships can be mended and strengthened – FORGIVENESS and RECONCILIATION.

The forgiveness and reconciliation that we see in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The forgiveness and reconciliation that God gives to us as he claims us as his own. The forgiveness and reconciliation that he then asks us to pass on to those around us.

Because human relationships are fragile, they need to be handled gently. In our world where we are surrounded by human beings, relationships cannot survive without forgiveness. They cannot survive positively without forgiveness and reconciliation. And I believe that not only does God show and model forgiveness and reconciliation to us in Jesus Christ, but through the Holy Spirit he also gives us the power to be able to do that ourselves.

But for that to happen forgiveness and reconciliation need to be more than just an idea in our lives, they need to be an attitude that we then put into practice.

Here is a thought that comes from the book *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande where he talks about an effect of using the golden rule to treat others as we would like to be treated. He calls this the Golden Result

The Golden Result says that people will usually treat us as we treat them. If we blame others for a problem, they will usually blame us in return. But if we say, "I was wrong," it is amazing how often the response will be, "It was my fault too."

I have seen this result in hundreds of cases over the past twenty-one years. Whether the dispute involves a personal quarrel, divorce, lawsuit, or Church division, people generally treat one another as they are being treated. When one person attacks and accuses, so does the other. And when God moves one person to start getting the log out of his or her own eye, it is rare that the other side fails to do the same.

The Golden Result occurs more often with people who understand and cherish the gospel. When we admit our own sins are so serious that Jesus had to die for us, and remember that he has forgiven us for all our wrongs, we can let go of our illusion of self-righteousness and freely admit our failures. When we do this, we experience the wonderful gift of God's forgiveness.

In so many cases this results in a softening and a willingness to work things out rather than to continue the conflict.

Because our relationships are so important to us, I'd like to challenge you today to consider yours.

First of all, what about your relationship to God? That is the most important relationship in your life. God tells you constantly just how important you are to him, and just how much he loves you. So where is that relationship at the moment from your side? Would you like to strengthen it? Well, as you go away from here today I challenge you to consider what things you can do to bring that about?

And what about your relationships with other people? Are there relationships at the moment in your lives where there is conflict or ill will? What can you do (notice I did not say what can the **other person** do but what can **you** do) to start to bring about peace and reconciliation into those relationships? Would the idea of the golden rule prove useful?

And then what about your relationships with people who are really close to you. So often we take those relationships for granted. What can you do to show that other person just how important they are to you, and just how important that relationship really is

May all of you take back into your relationships the heart and the mind, the love and the forgiveness of God and through these may all your relationships become ones where a spirit of reconciliation and peace is always seen.

Amen