

Sermon Notes 19/6/22

Title: *Honour the Father, Accept the Son*

Passage: John 5:18 - 29

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This, of course, is the dramatic opening sentence from John's gospel. There is something about John's account of Jesus' life and ministry which just feels different. The opening books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow the same series of events, and so there is a great deal of overlap between them. There is a natural unity. For this reason, we refer to them as the synoptic gospels, which literally means, they can be "seen together", or "seen side by side." But not John. John sits apart, approaching things from a different perspective, often focussing on miracles and discussions which we do not see anywhere else in the New Testament.

There are other differences too. For example, Jesus only performs seven miracles in John, and they are front-loaded into the first half of the gospel. Another significant difference is that Jesus only talks about the Kingdom of Heaven on two separate occasions in John, whereas it is the most common theme of his teaching in the other gospels.

So, what is the unifying theme of Jesus' teaching in this strange gospel? What is the focal point? And I think to answer that, I would need more time. And I don't mean another week, but several more years.

But what I can say with every confidence, is that more than the other gospels, John wants to lift the veil, and show us Jesus' inner relationship to God the Father. We are shown glimpses of their closeness, and Jesus' teaching is an invitation to share in that, to know the Father as Jesus does, as a child and a parent. And we see something of this theme in our passage today from John chapter 5.

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

And so, today, as the country marks Fathers' Day, we will be thinking about the closeness of the Father and the Son. And I want to reflect on these things with a very practical concern in mind. What does this passage tell us about our own parental responsibilities in the life of faith? And I don't want to be misunderstood here. I am not just addressing parents here. Rather, we are asking what does this passage mean for all of us, in our shared duty to nurture and to care for others? Indeed, what does it mean for Jesus to honour the Father, and what does that mean for the Church to do the same?

And I want to begin with a bad example. Let's remind ourselves of our Old Testament reading, where Jacob deceives his father. You'll remember the scene, as David read it only a few moments ago, but Jacob dresses up as his brother Esau, to convince his blind father,

Isaac, to give him his blessing, to confer upon him his great authority. Let me just read to you again some of the words of Isaac's blessing of Jacob.

Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

In this context, to bless someone is to confer upon them authority. Here, the authority of one generation is being passed on to the next. As it was for Abraham, so it was with his son Isaac, as it now rests with his son Jacob, the deceiver.

And as you may well imagine, when Esau uncovers this deception, he is furious. And what perhaps seems strange to us, is that the blessing is irrevocable; it cannot be taken back, it is legally binding despite this trickery. And when he hold these two passages up in parallel, Genesis 27 and John 5, when we compare Jacob and Jesus, the difference is clear.

Jacob deceives his father and steals his authority.
Jesus obeys his father and receives his authority.

Let's remind ourselves of our gospel reading where Jesus says, *For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.*

Jacob deceives his father and steals his authority.
Jesus obeys his father and receives his authority.

Now, all too often our own experience of relationships, of family life, bears more of a resemblance to that of Jacob than of Jesus. Indeed, our experience of church life looks more like Jacob than Jesus. We see the friction of Jacob and Esau at work from time to time, we see the tensions of Jacob jostling for position, seeking favour and prestige in the wider politics of church life. We occasionally see, with great regret, instances of deception or indeed, of intentional blindness in the broader structures of the institution. And we know that is not how church life should operate. We are grateful that God uses the Jacobs of this world, of course, that is us, that is grace, but we yearn to be more like Jesus, not least for the good of our families, and church family.

So what does it mean for us to honour God the Father, such as we see in John's gospel? And here, the answer must lie in verse 24 of our reading.

Truly, truly, I say you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement but has passed from death to life.

To honour the Father, as we see time and time again in John's gospel, is to honour the Son. That is, to honour the Father, we must trust in the his Son who he sent to tell us all about him. We must trust that Jesus truly tells us something life-giving about God.

How then can I honour my heavenly Father? - by trusting in his Son, whom he sent.

Now let us return to our very practical concern this Fathers' Day. What does this mean for our shared parental role in the life of the church?

At its most basic, it means that we point people in all circumstances to Jesus. And that's it. We execute our shared parental role in the life of the church by pointing all people in all circumstances to Jesus. The problem is, however, we so often do this in an artificial, clumsy or even dismissive way. We need to rediscover what it means to do this in an authentic way.

What it means to point someone to Jesus looks very different at a wedding than at a funeral. What it means to point someone to Jesus means something very different for someone who is celebrating than someone who is grieving.

As a PCC, this past week, we were reflecting that what it means to point people to Jesus in this season post-pandemic means something very different for different people. There are some people in church life raring to go, raring to get out into the community and share their faith. And that is wonderful. There are others however, who feel somewhat diminished by the pandemic and who simply wish to be cared for. And that is OK.

For the first time in this pandemic, we are entering a phase where we can move away from a monochrome response which says, "we are doing this" or "we are doing that," to one which can once again meet people where they are, and acknowledges we are all moving and recovering at different speeds.

This Fathers' Day, we are reminded of Jesus' words. To honour the Father, is to receive the Son whom he sent, in whom there is life." We know we should be pointing people to Jesus, but we want to do that in authentic way, which acknowledges we are all moving at different speeds.

And so what I am saying, is that in this strange new season, we as a parish, are recommitting ourselves to pastoral care. Not as something which is the preserve of the Vicar, or of the pastoral assistants, or of a core team of volunteers. But as something we all share in, as those jointly called to exercise a parental and nurturing role in the life of God's church.

Let's pray.