

# **NEW CREATION: RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS**

*(2 Corinthians 5.13-21 and John 17.20-26)*

Good morning everyone, what a joy and pleasure it is to greet you all this morning, even though, I am looking at a computer screen with the remnants of photographs of our family peeking through at the side, and not at the usual sea of smiling faces looking up from the congregation.

We live in strange times at present, yet the word of God is as alive and more meaningful than ever. I suspect many of you have shared precious moments with our Lord in this time of oppression, and had time to reflect on the glory of nature, and the world which surrounds us.



Trees starting to blossom, spring flowers in all their glorious colour, and the never-ending mystery of seeing birds building nests in the most precarious of places. In some ways we are reminded of, or at least seeing, a glimpse of the Garden of Eden. How fitting, therefore, that our series of study is New Creation.

Paul and I live on a busy road; when we first bought the property, it was a quiet lane, but over the years, with the volume of traffic, it has become much busier. However, in the last few weeks it has become quiet once again; initially, it felt eerie but we very quickly became acclimatised to the change.

As people we can become used to change, we have to learn to adapt to the changing world we live in; having to abide by social distancing and limited contact with our loved ones is completely different from anything we have known in the past. I'm always amazed at how adaptable people can be when faced with changes in society, but many of these changes are to accommodate our own comfort and lifestyle.

St. Paul himself in his letter to the Corinthian church admits that before his conversion he held views that were totally based on human considerations in his persecution of Christians, but following conversion his world view was completely transformed, he says, "from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." (2 Cor 5:16).

When we have a conversion experience, and become Christians (as Paul did on the road to Damascus) we become a changed people; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit changes us.

Some of Paul's enemies, following his conversion, thought he was deranged, out of his mind, suffering from religious mania, but Paul was very measured in his response to all these accusations, in simple unadorned language, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, written when he was still in Ephesus, he says that, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 5.17).

I suspect there are many this morning who can remember when they first gave their lives to Christ, a moment that changes our world view for the rest of our lives. One of the first acts following my conversion was to tell others. At first this can be daunting, sometimes our relationship with others shifts and it can be difficult for loved ones to fully understand, especially if they have had no contact with Christians.

The use of metaphor, in the way Jesus speaks to us, is very effective, especially in the shepherd analogy when he says, "I am the good shepherd. The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10.11) a clear image of loving sacrifice, one which those who don't know him cannot comprehend.

At the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, the unbelieving Jews challenged Jesus to confirm he was the Christ, Jesus says to the unbelievers, "I did tell you, but you do not believe." He then draws the distinction between the believer and non-believer and simply states, "My sheep listen to my voice." (John 10.25-27).

In this twenty first century there are many who do not listen, and there is a real need for all of us to become more effective in speaking out for the gospel - the Good News of Jesus Christ - in our everyday lives, to be people who live out our faith in the world, not in an apologetic way, but confident in our faith, belief and relationship with God.

The Rt Revd Rob Wickham, talking about Capital Vision 2020 in the Diocese of London, tells us that one of the outcomes was that 40,000 ambassadors across the diocese were inspired, "to be equipped and commissioned to represent Jesus Christ beyond Sunday in the places where they live and work." A missionary work in our own country at a time of great need.

We are a redeemed people through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Cor 5.20).

I'm sure the people in Long Newton and wider area have been very aware of Christ's ambassadors during these past weeks, with the generous food gifts and other offerings left in the church porch.



However, in this time of shut in and isolation, our relationship with those we live with, for some people, could be a testing time. Perhaps little idiosyncrasies, that under normal circumstances would be ignored, are somehow more noticeable and could be a form of irritation. Who does what, when and how, could all be areas of disagreement that have never been so in the past.

Recent tweets on social media on this subject read:

My wife asked me what I wanted for dinner.

I said, "Surprise me."

She handed me a pan and cook book and then sat on the couch and took a nap.

Another one which amused me reads;

Making a sandwich in the kitchen.

Wife: "Please don't leave crumbs all over the worktop."

Me: "Okay." (brushes crumbs on the floor...)

Our relationship with God is special and for it to be so we need to know him. The poet John Milton said: "The end of all learning is to know God, and out of that knowledge to love and imitate Him."

As in our relationship with our partners, we only really get to know them when we are close to them.

The closer we are to our Lord the more we will grow like Him. James says: "Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4.8). To enable us to develop a better relationship with God we need to spend time with Him, no excuse in this time of shut - in not to spend more time in his presence.

As Brian mentioned two weeks ago, religion depends on rites, traditions, buildings, but a relationship with our Lord is dependent on none of these things, all God asks is that we believe, and are one in our belief.

Often when reading scripture, I'll come across a passage that I know I must have read previously, and yet my understanding is different. It's as

if the Lord puts a spotlight on a passage he wants me to see in a different way, John 17:20-26 is one such passage that filled me with humility.

We are all familiar with the Lord's Prayer in which he gives us a template on how to speak to God; it's a wonderful prayer, but it is an example of how we can approach and speak to our Heavenly Father.

When I advised students who were struggling with how to begin writing their essays, I suggested a possible framework and the Lord's Prayer is a framework, an example, of how to speak to God. In our Gospel reading from John 17 we hear the Lord praying a personal prayer, and in his prayer he prays for each one of us.

When talking about the disciples he says, "I pray for all those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...."

Jesus was confident that the disciples would spread the word of God, and he prayed for all those who would believe, that's you and me this morning. Isn't that both thrilling and humbling?

All of us pray for others, no more so than in this anxious time at present, but we generally pray in isolation. However, when we do share our prayers in public and someone prays for us by name, we are especially moved and feel blessed by that person's love and concern.

Here we have Jesus praying for us and we can hear his prayer. The most humbling fact is he is focused on us at a time when he is experiencing tremendous anxiety, just prior to his arrest, when he knew the outcome, when he knew the disciples would disperse, and our Lord would be on his own, he prays for unity, and gives us His reasons for doing so:

"May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23).

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brothers and sisters in Christ here we have Jesus praying that the world may see that the love God has for his only son is the same love he has for each one of us, and this love is reflected in our unity based on faith and belief.

In this diverse world, we are all different people, we live in a world full of divisions, oneness isn't about eliminating differences ( what a bland place the world would be if we were all the same) oneness is about reflecting the love of God, a love like no other, a love that only comes from God.

As a people we are all linked by the common bond of humanity and God's desire for us all is to be reconciled to him, not as a people who have past sins to be held against us, but as a new creation, guiltless and free through the love of God. Our unity, our oneness is a sign to the world of God's love for us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

On this 6th Sunday of the Easter season let us all pray that God's love, which knows no boundaries, will overcome all divisions and the world will know how much God loves each one of us.

Finally, let us pray in this time of uncertainty and suffering that people will be drawn to the Lord and adhere to his teachings in their own lives, that they too may become Christians and ambassadors for him. Amen.