

**SERMON: 28 July 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Growing in God with the Growth God Gives”  
(Genesis 18:20—32 and Luke 11:1-13)**

I was sitting in the garden the other day having breakfast when I heard someone shouting in the park on the other side of the wall.

Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! Come on mercy, come on.

I wondered if I should climb the wall and see if they were in need of some divine assistance but decided to wait a bit longer.

Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! Come on mercy, come on.

Turns out, the dog's name was mercy and it wasn't too keen on keeping up with its mistress.

Now there might be someone here today who knows of a dog called Mercy. In fact, the owner might even be here or listening in. So, don't worry, I'm only telling you this, to introduce the idea that mercy is something we love.

But let me go off in a different direction and say a quick word about this week's reading from Colossians 2:5-19 which we didn't actually read today despite it being one of the set readings for this week.

And because we've spoken about Colossians for the past two weeks it might be good to link it into what we're thinking about today.

If I was to try to summarise what Colossians 2 means, it would be this. You've been made alive with Christ. Now hold fast to Christ and you will know growth that comes from God. Continue to live in Christ Jesus the Lord, abounding in thanksgiving.

The phrase 'growth that comes from God' jumps out at me. That's what we're about isn't it? Growing in God with the growth that comes from God.

Psalm 119:32 affirms this,

[SLIDE] I run in the path of your commands for you have broadened my understanding.

Our understanding of God grows through time and experience, through good times and bad times, through suffering and pain, through joy and sadness.

During his life the African-American civil rights leader, Howard Thurman [SLIDE], spoke a lot about faith being about growing in God through meditation and prayer. As well as this famous quote, he wrote about the necessary tension between God as transcendent and unknowable and God as the Intimate Presence that we need to know.

Here's something else he wrote:

“The human spirit has two fundamental demands that must be met relative to God. First, (God) must be vast, limitless, transcendent, all-comprehensive, so that there is no thing that is outside the wide reaches of (Gods) apprehension. The stars in the universe, the great galaxies of spatial groupings moving in endless rhythmic patterns in the trackless skies, as well as the tiny blade of grass by the roadside, are all within (Gods) grasp. The second demand is that (God) be personal and intimate. (People) must have a sense of being cared for, of not being alone and stranded in the universe. All of us want the assurance of not being deserted *by* life nor deserted *in* life. Faith teaches us that God is the fact of life from which all other things take their meaning and reality. [SLIDE] When Jesus prayed, he was conscious that, in his prayer, he met the Presence, and this consciousness was far more important and significant than the answering of his prayer. It is for this reason primarily that God was for Jesus the answer to all the issues and the problems of life. When I, with all my mind and heart, truly seek God and give myself in prayer, I, too, meet (Gods) Presence, and then I know for myself that Jesus was right.”

For me, this gets to the heart of the matter of growth in God; that in prayer we can know the intimate presence of the God who in so many ways is beyond knowing yet wants to be known.

Following in the Way of Jesus must be about sharing in this intimate experience of God that he knew. That for me is what Christ is and what Christ is all about.

[SLIDE] I think Abraham knew this intimacy in prayer when he speaks to God about Sodom. In the Genesis story, Sodom and Gomorrah are indicative of everything that is evil or wicked in the world. Remember Abraham's nephew Lot has gone to live in Sodom, attracted by the lure of what appeared to be the most fertile ground but in fact turned out to be no more than skin deep. Lot was already a wealthy man so he probably didn't need more wealth. Why then was he attracted to a place where the people were known to be “unusually wicked and sinned greatly against the Lord (13:13)?

So perhaps it's no surprise that we find Abraham quite rightly praying for Lot and his family.

I've usually read this story as Abraham bargaining with God trying to get God to change God's mind about destroying these places of wickedness and wiping out Lot and his family at the same time.

Interesting, the Lord says he has heard the outcry against Sodom and will go and see what's going on. God doesn't tell Abraham that Sodom is going to be destroyed. Abraham, it appears, assumes that God's response is going to be to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, because that's what a righteous God would do wouldn't he?

But is God more merciful than Abraham thinks God is?

Surely Lord, says Abraham, you'll not destroy the righteous along with the wicked? Surely Lord, you'll not destroy them all if 50 righteous people are found? Or 45? Or 40? Or 30? Or 20? Or 10?

It seems Abraham is bargaining God down to as small a number as possible, as if he was in some sort of weird auction. How many righteous people are worth saving Sodom? Who'll start me off with 50?

The reality of course is that only one was righteous enough to save the whole world and that was God himself in Christ Jesus. And its this righteousness that we're learning to dress ourselves with, by God's grace.

So is Abraham learning something of God's heart as he prays? Is he growing in God as he prays? Is he discovering that this God is maybe not like the other gods who are believed to take vengeance easily and wipe out every threat of opposition as soon as it appears.

Because a tribal view of ones god would be to be  
I eve in an all powerful god who annihilates opposition in order to assert their status as the top dog.

This is a very flawed human way of thinking of power and authority. And perhaps we saw a glimpse of it in this week's cabinet reshuffle, where it seemed to be important to get rid of the opposition in order to assert some sort of authority.

Or in the USA where much of the country continues to uphold the death penalty as the way to get rid of those who have committed crime because execution is quicker and easier than the hard work of restorative justice and rehabilitation needed for offenders. America may be a civilised nation but it still has some barbaric practises.

Which is why Leaders, as well as those who follow them, need to spend time in prayer so as to discover the God of grace and mercy.

Now as much as ever, our country needs people of Godly character, of integrity and honesty. We need to be merciful and righteous people and God has shown us the way.

In Abraham's prayer for Lot and his family, is Abraham discovering that his God is merciful? That this God he's learning to trust, is the God who allows both the wheat and the weeds to grow together until the time of the harvest, so that the tender shoots of wheat might not be destroyed in the aggressive action of weeding out.

I think that as he prays, Abraham discovers that God is truly merciful, that God wills all people to turn to discover that their own true essence is goodness - to be good and to do good.

Yes there were some horrible things going on in Sodom and Gomorrah, things which deserved to be destroyed. Read on into chapter 19 of Genesis and we discover the men of Sodom wanting to have sex with the Lord's messengers who arrive in Sodom to see what's going on. And when the men are making to burst their way in to Lot's house where the visitors are staying, Lot tries to appease them by, wait for it, offering the men his only two daughters to do with as they please. Totally depraved. Totally evil. And Lot is implied to be one of the righteous ones whom Abraham mentions in his bargaining with God!

Who is good in this scenario? No one. Yet the Lord saves Lot and his family. Not that this meant Lot's family had an instant transformation to goodness. Its not long before Lot's daughters are forced to have children by their own father and this is the start of the Moabites and the Ammonites, who would be continually at war with Israel for centuries to come.

The consequences of wrongdoing can leave their mark on families for generations.

But before we get too depressed, we need to remember that it's into exactly these real human tragic stories that God intervenes with life and light and love.

Jesus is God's great intervention into human history. And we find him in Luke 11 teaching his disciples how to pray, how to grow in God with the growth that comes from God.

There's no mention here of having to bargain with God. There's an assumption that God can be approached as the Merciful One, the Father, who longs to give good things to those who ask. The Father who exists as a real father to his children, in other words, in a close, intimate, personal, loving relationship. A father who wants his children to wake him at all hours of the

night and to ask and to keep on asking, to seek and to keep on seeking, to knock and to keep on knocking on the door of mercy. A father who longs to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. A father who longs to anoint his children with the very Presence of God, to mark them in such a way that they begin to look differently and feel differently and act differently, and together, become a people who seek first the kingdom of God with all its goodness, blessing and peace for all of creation.

You and I are all children of God with these very same privileges. So let us approach the throne of grace in confidence and continue to discover mercy in our time of need and a growing, fruitful and abundant life. In Jesus name.