

SERMON: 31 March 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Ambassadors with Humility”

(2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

“If anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation” (5:17) is perhaps one of my favourite verses in the Bible. I especially like how TPT puts it, “if anyone is enfolded into Christ....”.

I like the idea of being enfolded into Christ, like the egg and flour are enfolded into the sugar and butter in a Victoria sponge cake!

Paul goes on to write that those who are in Christ are chosen and called to be ambassadors,

“We are ambassadors of the Anointed One who carry the message of Christ to the world” (5:20)

Here’s what the commentary to TPT says about being an ambassador:

“To be ambassadors for Christ means that we are his diplomatic agents of the highest rank sent to represent King Jesus and authorised to speak on his behalf. We are the voice of heaven to the earth, invested with royal power through the name of Jesus and authority of his blood.”

That sounds like a very high calling, and it is, the highest calling possible. And it needs to be taken with a good dose of humility.

Power and authority is too easily abused. It needs wisdom in its use and it needs to be wielded but this who have learned to be humble.

In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were slow to learn this truth. They were too often immature in their understanding of God that they worked to exclude people rather than reach out with compassion. They couldn’t figure why Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners. They’d forgotten the ways of the God who had taught their ancestors humility through the humiliation of slavery in a foreign land.

So Jesus tells them the parable of the lost son.

The lost son learns humility through his experience of exile, albeit self imposed exile. It was his own choice “to set off for a distant country and squander his

wealth in wild living”, outside the protection of the law, and end up working as a slave in amongst the pigs, another metaphor for his sorry state amongst unclean outsiders.

I think we learn here that when people go through difficulty it may be that their lives are about to be reordered. People grow spiritually in times of conflict or distress, when faced with circumstances that disrupt the norm.

I'm not saying you need to go looking for conflict so that you can grow! No, don't worry about that. It seems that in life, conflict or disturbance will soon come looking for us, and when it does, we need to know that it won't have the last word.

There comes a point in the story where the lost son realises his lostness. The text says he comes to his senses, or he comes to himself would be an accurate translation of the Greek, and he realises his true identity. He's a child of his father, not a slave of anyone else.

He's ready to own his own failings. He's not blaming anyone else. He's recognising his own part in his downfall, and that's really important.

There's a sense that what he's doing here is going through a death. He's dead to that way of living and being. He's ready to move on. He's ready to be raised a new creation.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants” (18-19).

And then he resolves to do something about it - “he got up and went to his father” (20).

People might be stuck in a place or situation which they don't like but never resolve to actually do something about it to change it.

Is there something you need to resolve in your mind to do today? Something that your heart is telling you to move upon?

It might be a simple, I'm not going to think like that anymore. Instead I'm going to believe who I truly am, a son or daughter of God the Father.

Whatever it is or was, when we take it to God the Father, we're met with God's loving embrace.

The God who knows our thoughts from afar, even when we have put ourselves far away, the same God has forgiven us and runs towards us with arms of compassion, overjoyed at the reconciliation.

We might, like the lost son, approach God with feelings of unworthiness, but we discover that when we own any fault on our part that we're met with unconditional love.

But what can we say of the elder brother?

Well, according to the father, he was always in the father's presence and everything was his. So what was his problem? Why was he not living in that place of grace, abundance, freedom and infinite love? What was it that stopped the flow?

Was it his jealousy - seeing his brother made a fuss of, being given the robe and the ring, and the fattened calf, symbols of status which he coveted for himself as the eldest?

Or his offended idea of justice - his younger brother deserved to be punished not treated with undeserved favour?

Was it his poverty spirit - which complained at the necessary expense, and the cost of the father's celebration?

Yes, these three reasons would all be reasons to block the flow of grace in the elder brother, and make him blind to the celebration.

The younger son is like the tax collectors and sinners, whom Jesus treated with undeserved favour.

The elder son is like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who were jealous, whose ideas of justice were offended, and whose poverty spirits complained at unnecessary expense, and who assumed a spirit of scarcity in the world, not a kingdom of gracious abundance.

We're left to wonder what would happen to the elder brother. Jesus leaves the parable with both sons together in their father's care. And maybe that's the way it's to be.

Like the parable of the wheat and the weeds, both are left to grow until the time of the end when the harvest comes.

I think God's hope is that the weeds will die back and only the wheat will be left in the end. A gracious transformation will have taken place. Elder brothers will be changed. Poverty spirits will die. Jealousy will cease. Spirits of offence will be no more.

As we finish, remember that "We are ambassadors of the Anointed One who carry the message of Christ to the world" (5:20)

As the Anointed One, the Christ, Jesus came to this earth and discovered what it was like to be in a far away land, and to long for things to be different, for the father's kingdom to come.

Most of us too, have known what its like to be in a far away land. We've not always been close to God. We've been amongst the pigs and we've longed for more.

But now, we've began the journey of coming to our senses in Christ. We're resolving to do something about it, to seek our father's kingdom, to see heaven come on earth. We share this same commission that Jesus had - making disciples and proclaiming the kingdom of heaven in the face of a world which at times feels very distant from that.

But let's not lose that vision. Let's keep at it here in KNEC. Let's pray that this week we will all be worthy ambassadors of Christ as Christ is formed in us more and more fully through the grace of our God and the work of God's Spirit.