

## Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'.  
We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God.  
We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean. We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.

**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2021**

### **1. Reading: Philippians 2:4-8**

4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
6 who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
7 but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
8 he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

### **2. Questions:**

- i. The passage that we have read from Philippians 2 describes Jesus as '*...being in very nature God.*' As you explore the nature of God together through the following questions, begin by briefly considering these two statements: 'Jesus is like God' and 'God is like Jesus'. Are they saying the same thing or something different?

- ii. If you were asked to describe God, what words would use? You can use different 5 words only. Give each person in your group time to write down their words before sharing them with the group. Note the different images of God that are shared.
- iii. I suggested that the image of God that we hold has developed through numerous influences and referred to the Bible and the Church specifically. i.e. our reading and interpretation of the Bible and Bible teaching that we have received and traditions held by the church or churches that we have been involved with. Reflect on how your image of God has changed and the extent to which these influences have affected your current image. Have there been other influences that have been important in your consideration of the nature of God?
- iv. God's nature reveals his mission, that all might be saved. He cares for all people, the 100, the one and the 99. What is God saying to you through this examination of the nature of God? Is God challenging you to revisit previously held beliefs or inherited positions?

### **3. Prayer**

- Begin by acknowledging who God is and praising him. You might find it helpful to read from some of the Psalms of praise, e.g. Psalms 145-150
- Invite God to help you to capture a clear and true image of God. Submit to him any false images that have developed.
- Ask God to develop a Christlike image of God in me.
- Praise to God for his indescribably love and grace towards the lost – even to us.

### **4. Text of the Sermon:**

#### **The Nature of God**

Last Sunday Ash brought a New Year message to us, for the church, from the parable taught by Jesus of the Lost Sheep Luke 15 and Matthew 18. Where the shepherd leaves the 99 in a field grazing and goes off in search of the one that is lost.

We have been challenged to be those who go and search 'for the lost'.

This isn't an academic challenge, it really doesn't take long to understand what the parable is saying, it is a challenge that is a call for action. A call to care and a call to go and a call to seek out.

And to respond to this we need to ask the question who are the lost sheep that God is calling us to seek out? Individually and corporately. To open our ears and our hearts to Gods call, to pray, to listen and to respond to the Holy Spirits prompting.

So, this coming Thursday evening we are going to gather to pray, to listen to God, to prepare our hearts and to be willing to respond to the HS. This journey with God begins and must continue in prayer.

The messages over the coming weeks will develop the theme of seeking after the lost and today we begin by looking at the Nature of God. What is it about Gods character that means the lost one, the rebellious one is as important to him that he would leave those who are close to him and at great cost to himself go and pursue the one who is lost?

Our Bible passage today is Philippians 2:5-8 which says this:

<sup>5</sup> *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

<sup>6</sup> *who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

<sup>7</sup> *rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.*

<sup>8</sup> *And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!*

The writer is the apostle Paul who is imploring these early disciples of Jesus at Philippi to be Christ like in their relationships with one another. *‘...have the same mindset as Christ Jesus’.*

In the words before the passage that we have read he highlights what this should look like in practical terms;

*‘... if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.’*

Have the same mindset as Jesus, the same attitude, the same compassion, the same love, the same Spirit, it's a call to unity, Why? Because the ways of Jesus are the ways of God, exactly the same. The words at the beginning of the book of Hebrews tell us Heb 1:3 *‘The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being..’*

And in John 1:18 *‘No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.’*

The word used in Philippians is nature. Jesus, *‘...being in very nature God’.* And our calling is to be like him. To be Christlike and in doing so we will play our part in revealing God to others.

So, what is God's nature? And how far have we changed to be Christlike, to reflect his likeness?

How do you and I see God? Where do we get our image of God from? Of course, there are many sources, but I suggest that there are two that influence us the most. The Bible and the Church.

If you are listening to this and thinking, well I have not been brought up in the church and have hardly ever read the Bible so that can't be true for me. I ask you to think again. The Bible has heavily influenced our culture, many of our laws are based on fairness and justice values spoken of in the Bible, on the 10 commandments, the Lords prayer and many Bible stories influence our language and culture. If you have not been a member of a church or attended services, the church worldwide has presented an image of God to the world that you will have heard. It may not be an image of God that is wholly consistent with the Bible, but an image of God will be in your mind.

And the same is true of those who do read the Bible, who are involved in church life at some level and these two influences have shaped and are shaping your understanding of the very Nature of God. Our reading and interpretation of the Bible may not be wholly consistent with the true Nature of God as seen in Jesus.

We read through lenses and our vision is often unclear. We may have a part of the truth about the nature of God which dominates our thinking and in doing so miss other aspects of his character that prevent us from seeing the fulness of who God is and what he is like.

Even in what I am saying now I am using established assumptions or norms, I have referred to God several times as 'He'. Does that describe God accurately?

I suggest that we need to keep questioning if our image is in focus and to be open to dispel false images that we hold that have come to us from an incomplete and inaccurate reading of the Bible and any false images of God that we have come to believe that have been influenced by teaching from church traditions that we have inherited. And within those traditions will be the words of the worship songs that we sing. Some giving a very singular and limited image of God labouring on one aspect and leaving out the richness of who God is. I won't name any, they might be your favourites!

I wonder, if asked that question today what our answers would be? What is your image of God? What words would you use to describe God? What would be at the top of your list, how far down the list would some describing words be? If asked, what would your answer be to the question – what is God like?

Just reflect on that for a moment. What are the first words that come into your mind?

Remember if you are asked that question you won't have long to give a reply!

Whatever words we use, be it, Creator, Holy, Perfect, Loving, Forgiving, King, our description will not be complete but what it will do is reflect our understanding of who God is from our experience of Him.

And WHY so important? If our image of God is too limited or incomplete, it will affect our willingness and capacity to respond to the challenge to leave the 99 and search for the one who is lost.

If our heart isn't aligned with the heart of God to go and search out the lost we won't do it. x2

We may need to rethink, reimagine, revise our image of God so that we can respond to the challenge of the one.

We describe God's nature when we speak of the trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. God in relationship and God in unity.

God is also described in these 3 ways, as LIGHT, SPIRIT and LOVE. These words help us to hold some of character of God that is described in the Bible and as revealed through Jesus.

God is Light – We may think of words like Holiness, Righteousness, Truth, Wisdom and Justice. Light is also searching, penetrating, reaches all places, dispels darkness. Light brings life, it makes life possible, it brings peace to all who walk in it.

God is Spirit – Here we have the Omni's! Omnipotent (power and authority unlimited), Omniscience (all knowing, unlimited knowledge and understanding), Omnipresence (present everywhere all the time, nowhere that you can go where God isn't) and Infinite and Eternal. Jesus said, *'God is Spirit and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth'*. God as Spirit transcends all limitations, God is boundless and outgoing.

God is Love – Merciful, Gracious, Benevolent, Long suffering, Kind and Good. One writer has put it like this; *Divine love is that impelling and dynamic quality in which God moves out of Himself and in which He relates Himself in all His beneficence and sufficiency to His creation. His love motivates Him eternally to communicate and to impart Himself to the object of His relationship.* This is the nature of God Love so deep, so profound and for us.

His nature described in these ways reveals his missional intent. Moral perfection, transcendent presence and sacrificial love towards all that he has made. God is fully committed to us and to the world he created.

Jesus presented all these aspects of God to his disciples in his teaching and in the way he lived but he also gave us one other image that we can directly relate to, that is of God as our Heavenly Father.

His followers saw Jesus praying to God, demonstrating his deep relationship with God, a relationship that Jesus desired and depended upon. The disciples wanted more and asked how shall we pray? to which he replies, *'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...'*. A loving Father and child relationship. One so intimate, so close that he even uses the word Abba – Daddy. It doesn't get more personal than that.

God loves all that he has made as a loving and caring Father loves his family. The Bible speaks of this throughout. Read the 9, 10 and 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Romans and see there that God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Moses, the God of Israel, he chosen people. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and he is the God of the Gentiles, that is the God of all people. Romans 9:25 *'I will call them "my people" who are not my people; and I will call her "my loved one" who is not my loved one'* and Hosea 2:23

God's nature, his very being is Love and this Love determines that he is a missionary God, he seeks relationship with all his children, he reaches out, he searches after, he has a plan, and that plan includes all people. And through His Son he has done all that is necessary for us to be in relationship with him. His rescue plan was costly, it cost him the life of his one and only Son dying on a cross for our sake. Everyone of us.

Back to the passage in Philippians 2:7,8

*he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!*

There is a very simple mathematical aspect of the parable of the lost sheep, the parable that speaks of the 99 and the 1. And it is the fact that  $99+1=100$  and 100 is all that he had. It is Inclusive, all are invited. All may come.

Gods Heart and Mind search for the lost – The Lost Sheep is one of 3 parables about God's heart for the lost. In Luke 15. The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son. We don't have time to look at these today suffice to say that they demonstrate the Heart of God for those who do not know Him.

Response

The inclusive heart of God for relationship with all people is a love beyond our love. We may be comfortable in reaching out to those like us, with similar values and behaviours but what about those who are not like us, can we reach out to them?

If we are to connect with God's heart for the lost, our hearts need to be changed, to be broken and remoulded. To be enlarged. To be Christlike.

It might be that our inherited image of God needs to be renewed by the revelation of God that is seen in Jesus. We need to put ourselves in the place of surrender to God, letting go of false images that we might have held on to, are we willing to do that?

When we meet 'the lost' we need to tell them about this God who saves. Let's make sure that we tell them about the God of the Bible and not the God that we have created. We may need to revise our image in order that we can fulfil this calling.

At the End of the 3 chapters in Romans that I referred to earlier we read this:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and<sup>[1]</sup> knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!*

<sup>34</sup> *'Who has known the mind of the Lord?*

*Or who has been his counsellor?*

<sup>35</sup> *'Who has ever given to God,*

*that God should repay them?*

<sup>36</sup> *For from him and through him and for him are all things.*

*To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*