

Notes and questions from the talks for further engagement by individuals or groups.

allsaintsworcester

# BELOVED IDENTITY (1): the gift of grace

### Recap

In this talk Rich spoke about the central importance of God's grace (His "unmerited favour") in helping us discover, and keep rediscovering, our identity as beloved children of God and His unconditional love for us.

We learned that when it comes to knowing our identity it's actually knowing God's identity that is key.

In contrast to the way of our world, with all its crippling metrics, unattainable ideals and relentless comparison – in which we score ourselves, assess our performance and try to prove ourselves worthy of love – God's love is based on who He is and what He's like.

### Read and ask

Psalm 51 & 2 Samuel 11 & 12.

- Where do we see the same "loving Father" that Jesus spoke about in Luke 15?
- Where do we grace offered and grace received?
- What is required of us?

### **Discuss**

Rich suggested that we leave the security and comfort of God's unconditional love for us every time we reach for unconditional love where it cannot be found – what Nouwen describes as "leaving home":

#### Henri Nouwen

"Leaving home is a denial of the spiritual reality that we belong to God with every part of our being, that God holds us safe in an eternal embrace. Leaving home is living as though we do not yet have a home and must look far and wide for one."

- Could you relate to the story about "Jessie" that Rich told at the beginning of his talk?
- How did it help you understand grace and what God is like?
- In what ways are we all tempted to leave home? What might visiting the "far country" in Luke 15 look like in our culture?
- What makes returning 'home' (a) hard and (b) possible?
- What role do we have in one another's lives to help with all this?

### **Practice**

Take some time to reflect on your "inheritance" from God and what you have "at home". Consider listing them all and prayerfully giving thanks.

Reflect on times when you have had to "come home" and how God has embraced you. Are there any patterns to pay attention and address?

# BELOVED IDENTITY (2): love drives out fear

# Recap

This Sunday Jess carried on our Beloved Identity series, looking at the subject of fear. Reading from 1 John 4, she focussed on verse 18, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

Jess used two stories to illustrate how fear can affect our lives. Firstly, the story of a cat ready to pounce, trapping someone in a corner. Fear wants to isolate us and force us to only see the concerns and anxieties in front of us. Secondly, she used an illustration of split milk leaving a smell to explain that when we live in fear it affects every area of our lives and begins to cause damage.

When we listen to the voice of fear over the voice of God it distorts our identity. Our identity is found in being a child of God, co-heirs with Christ. It's in Jesus we find out we are known, loved and adopted into family.

The author of the letter, John, was writing to remind the church that their fear of judgement had been resolved in Jesus. He was wanting them to be free and confident to spread the gospel. When we say yes to Jesus it's His perfect love that casts away this deep fear of not being good enough.

## Read and ask

Genesis 3:1-7

- What was the enemy intention by asking the questions "Did God really say...?"
- How did Adam & Eve react?
- What did fear lead to?
- Where are you questioning God at the moment?

#### Discuss

- Within 1 John 4:7-21, what else do we read about the love of God?
- What does it mean for God's love to be complete in us?
- - How does the knowledge of being loved by God stop us from feeling fearful?
- What fears do you currently have? Does this text bring comfort to them?
- Is fear distracting you from God? What are the truths in scripture that could help?

#### **Practice**

Take some time on your own to reflect and notice the place of fear in your life.

- When/where is the voice of fear louder than God's?
- In this season are you feeling more or less fearful than normal? Why is that?

With a trusted friend you may want to vocalise some of these fears and pray together for God's love and truth to displace them. When we bring these fears into the light, the enemy can no longer isolate you and keep you in the dark.

# **BELOVED IDENTITY (3): Success?**

### Recap

What do you want from this life? In your judgement, what would count as a really successful life? Achieving a measure of popularity, position, power or happiness?

The poet Raymond Carver saw that what he really wanted from life was "to feel himself beloved on the face of the earth."

This identity as 'beloved' or 'so loved' was the beginning point for Jesus – as he is baptised the voice of the Father dramatically breaks out of the skies, declaring that, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased."

That verdict of God's delight and approval over Jesus, is one that is given to us. We don't deserve but it is nevertheless the true verdict over our existence in Christ. We are co-heirs with Christ, to use the language of Paul (Romans 8).

When Jesus is then tempted in the desert, the devil casts doubt on Jesus status as beloved, highlighting his lack of food, followers and power, but Jesus resists, insisting that the love of the Father is not riding on popularity, power or even a basic level of fulfilment.

### Read and ask

Matthew 3.16-4.11

- Do you struggle with believing that the verdict of heaven over Jesus is now the verdict of heaven over your existence?
- Have you ever had moments of especially knowing God's love over you?
- What helps/hinders your knowing of this reality?
- How does the voice of the tempter/slanderer attempt to lure you away from the security of God's love?

#### **Discuss**

The love of God delivers us from all our attempts to prove ourselves or achieve power/wealth/security for ourselves. The love of God delivers us into freedom. We can be free to have a go, free to fail, free to care less about all the ranking systems, free for things not to go to plan. We can even be free to experience lack and unfulfillment and it be ok.

Because after all, the pattern of Jesus is the cross. Jesus' success was this most humiliating death, powerless, shamed and abandoned. This is what the love of God looks like when meeting the brokenness of the world. It is so radically different from all our default ideas around success like chasing popularity, status or happiness, that perhaps we should start using a different word to express our aspirations – how about aiming at living lives of fidelity? Fidelity (faithfulness) to the love of God.

Contemplative prayer and attaching ourselves to community are two ways we might lean into this cross shaped definition of success. The prayer helps us root ourselves as 'beloved' with nothing left to prove, and the friendships within community help deliver us from ideas we might have about life being a competition – if it is a race, then let's be holding hands as we cross the line.

- In what ways do you want to walk more in this freedom of there being nothing left to prove?
- How do the temptations of Jesus foreshadow the cross?
- Who do you know who lives their life in 'high-fidelity' to the love of God? How do they inspire you?
- What implications does the pattern of the cross have for how we leverage our opportunities/gifts/privilege?

#### **Practice**

- Take 20 mins to sit in silence, doing nothing except attempting to be present to the reality that you are so loved by God. Here's a quote to encourage you: "Contemplation has been described as 20 minutes of assured failure! For after 20 minutes you can't say, "I did it right" or "I prayed well" or "I won!" Franciscan Hermit on Twitter.
- Make a list of your talents/gifts/opportunities. Then add another column with ideas of how these may be employed to lift others up. Act on it.