

St Brandon's, Sermon for 15th October 2023.

Philippians 4.1-9

Growing up to be holy

Alison Hobbs

I wonder whether Elle-Louise will grow up to be holy? I remember as a very young child my godfather asking me what I would be when I grew up. My answer was, "I'll be an old lady, knitting." It earned me a laugh, and later, a lovely model from Belgium of an old lady in her rocking chair knitting fine lace. It had seemed to me a stupid question with a very obvious answer: I'll become old, and do what I saw old people doing.

There is an inevitability about growing old, and not quite such an inevitability about growing holy, however, we have just listened to some of the best instructions for achieving holiness, and none of it was complicated, or requiring specialised knowledge. We are instructed to look at what the author, Paul is doing and saying, and do likewise.

Paul says, 'finally, beloved ...' but I'd like to say, "initially, beloved ...". Initially, notice those things that are said and done around you during an ordinary day that are praiseworthy.

Actions, little gestures or words that bring pleasure, put right a wrong, promote well-being, convey respect to the overlooked: whatever is pleasing, true, just, honourable, pure and commendable, excellent and worthy of praise: notice it and think about it.

Thinking about it means considering its merits and letting the memory of it linger in our minds. Remembering it later in the day, returning to the memory to squeeze a little more out of it. Thinking about these praiseworthy things will teach us to spot them and emulate them so we gradually adopt similar ways, saying and doing praiseworthy small actions through our day.

Paul says, when we do these things, the God of Peace is with us: these are the messages of peace and actions of peace, they help us feel at peace with the world and help others find peace.

If you doubt that, consider the effect of doing the opposite – imagine spending every day focussing on the hurtful: on gossip and slander, acts of exploitation, prejudice and exclusion, lies and aggression.

It doesn't take much imagining to realise that we would quickly become full of hatred and rage, yet impotent, and unable to feel safe anywhere: miserable, damaged and damaging.

Paul urges us to focus entirely on the praiseworthy, and through that, be aligned with the God of peace.

Now I'm starting here because I want to say something to all who are doubtful that they know God; to those who say God's not relevant to them, or that they don't believe God exists. I say that if you have experienced the 'feelgood factor' associated with praiseworthy actions, you have experienced God.

God is present in those praiseworthy actions, God is the inspirer and driver of those praiseworthy actions, even when the person doing them would not recognise that.

God does his work through people who don't believe in him as well as through those that do. God comes to find us, first, when we are grubby and uninterested, and when we respond to the good things he offers and we start wanting to know him, then a genuine relationship begins to build, one that takes us through a lifetime living a new kind of life.

Catherine and Daniel have asked that Elle-Louise be blessed with the gift of baptism, and that's a wonderful gift but it doesn't ensure a life lived with God. It will require Elle-Louise to respond to the gift for herself as she grows up, putting effort into getting to know God, and forming that strong relationship. Baptism is like a gift that the parents unwrap but eventually, the child must take it out of the box, and use it.

There is an immensely important point I need to make now.

I wanted to start with the encouragement to notice and emulate doing and saying good things, all that is praiseworthy. That was because I wanted to start by illustrating where we can see God at work.

God is not interested in waiting for us to prove we are good or nice people before he invites us into relationship. Far from it, all he wants from us is to realise that he longs for us to get to know him, to realise he is all we could ever desire of loving generosity, of unfailing goodness. To realise how much we need that in our shabby, shallow lives. Invite him in, and he brings his richness, warmth and colour into our lives.

Paul writes, “The Lord is near.”

I picture God as the kind of wrap I need right now: often a soft, furry blanket wrapped around, warming and relaxing me. Sometimes a tighter wrap, like a newborn is wrapped: firmly holding and reassuring me. Sometimes, in the wake of shock, a reflective foil recovery blanket keeping the last of my energy safe. Sometimes a protective shielding wrap. And sometimes a beautiful wrap of celebration.

Whatever I need, God knows and will supply – does supply, if I stop to notice: he is near.

Note: this is not the same as saying God will supply whatever I *want*, he’s no sugar-daddy but he indulges my real *needs*, knows them better than me, and sometimes it’s a long time before I understand what it was I *needed*.

Paul tells us not to worry about anything, “*but let your requests be made known to God.*” We can make our requests in silence or in words, through any and all emotions, we can share our troubles and ask his help. We are never, therefore, alone in our troubles.

There are no magic fixes but God can show us strategies to use: nudge us towards a route. And he can give us additional strength which, like the peace that is beyond understanding, has a quality beyond our own resources. There is so much to be thankful for; we give thanks to God for all he gives. These sharings are the prayers of our hearts, the communication between the lover and the loved. They create in us a particular state of peace and joy that Paul names as ‘rejoicing’.

“Rejoice always” he writes. Can we really? Is that not too simplistic a view of life? Jesus’ teaching is generally remarkably simple: put God first, and love our neighbours as ourselves. Simple but not easy! Jesus also tells tough stories in

order to convey the urgency and importance of his message: simple doesn't mean of little value, he is teaching something pricelessly precious.

Can we rejoice always? We are not *asked* to rejoice in the pain and mess of our violent world. We are not *asked* to rejoice at the situation in Gaza and Israel, but to pray for it, and send practical aid. We can rejoice that God is faithful and will not abandon them. We throw them our prayers like goodwill grenades wanting those in distress to know God's love and nearness wrapping them. For those caught up in the violence and the fallout, every shred of human love and every praiseworthy action will be life-giving moments of rejoicing: precious God-actions bringing hope.

In the darkest places, a small light can look very bright. So, in the gloom and harshness of Ukrainian homes, these shoeboxes will bring a joy much brighter than the same would in our well lit homes. We give not because we are good but because we have received. We have received God's love, become God-people, wanting to give because we have been given an over-flowing measure of love, entirely without deserving it.

We are God-people.

We hope, incidentally, to be good people but holiness is so much more. More like becoming the wholeness of who God made us, and the whole of ourselves being for God. It's a lifelong work, and we encourage and will support any of you, and particularly today those who have come with Elle-Louise, to try it for yourself and her for herself. Start perhaps with Messy Church. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *Amen*