

Confirmation 13.1.19

Would you like to hear me play the piano? No you wouldn't like to hear me play the piano. I got to grade 3 at 13 and then gave up – in fact I wanted to give up everything at 13. So guess what? I can hardly play a tune now. If however I had kept up the piano, making my practice regular and long-term, it would be a different matter. And the danger is we do the same at baptism or confirmation – our commitment and learning suddenly stops when baptised or confirmed, like we're graduating...when actually our following of Jesus is meant to be life-long and repeatedly refreshed. So Clare, Vanessa, Jordan, Liam, Michelle, let me give you four suggestions for your ongoing practice of following Jesus beyond today.

First keep on remembering who you are. That's not as easy as it sounds. Remember who you are before God. **You are an unceasing spiritual being with a wonderful destiny in God's great universe.** Say it to yourself. *I am an unceasing spiritual being with a wonderful destiny in God's great universe.* Memorize it. Loud voices in our society will attempt to keep you from appreciating who you are before God. The world gets it wrong when it says we are physical beings having an occasional spiritual experience. No, we are spiritual beings who on this earth are having a physical experience. The world is obsessed with stuff like cryonics, freezing bodies at death and defrosting once a cure for death and ageing of the body is found, eg Simon Cowell. This fails to appreciate it is our continuing spiritual being, the resurrected body, what's sometimes called in scripture the soul, the spirit, the heart which is everlasting not this particular material stuff...which is why Jesus is so cavalier about his own body's fate, why he says to the disciples "do not worry about those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul" Mt 10.28 and elsewhere "for what will it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" Mk 8.36

Today we celebrate Jesus' baptism, but it was something of an embarrassment to parts of the early Church that Jesus, the Son of God, allowed himself to be baptised, the one tempted as we are yet without sin. What on earth was he thinking of? He didn't need cleansing. But partly Jesus was making a point about who he was – he was first and foremost the Son of the Father. So he is unconcerned about the expectations of those around him, indifferent to the approval of the authorities, happy to be baptised by cousin John and show us that it is our relationship with our Father that is the rock on which our identity is to be founded, a relationship *He knew* continued beyond the physical horizon of this life.

Who are you?

You are an unceasing spiritual being with a wonderful destiny in God's great universe.

Second remember who God is. Who is God? Well the best picture we have of God is Jesus – so don't believe anything about God that doesn't put you in mind of Jesus. You know the way some people talk about God it doesn't put you in mind of Jesus...it puts you in mind of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or a doddering grandfather the other side of the Universe sitting there with a blank cosmic stare. Don't believe it...the God of Jesus is joy, that's what Jesus says, joy. The greatest party in the world, in fact out of this world, is found in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart says "the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs at the Father and the laughter brings forth pleasure and the pleasure brings forth joy and the joy brings forth love". He describes God's joy as like the exuberance of a horse that gallops around the field, kicking its heels in the air.

The story of the gospel is of how we are invited to find our home in this happiness – St Catherine of Siena compared it to basking in a big soft bed or the sea, or if you want a more dynamic image, Gregory of Nyssa said it's going from glory to glory, from discovery of beauty and goodness to even more beauty and goodness, unendingly.

This God looks at us and says to us “you are my child my beloved, with whom I am well pleased” and calls us to union with Him. Of course in this world of ours there is that which is against God, against God's purposes, Jesus tells us this - and we see this resistance as much in ourselves as in the world – and for now God allows this resistance in an environment allowing us to grow in love and goodness. But whatever you do, do not confuse the bad stuff with God. Of course we live in a universe subject to physical laws, human freedom and thus subject to tension, temptation, and tragedy from time to time. But God does not want or plan tragedy and in the midst of this God is here, able to take any situation forward if we would have it, and always, always working for good. Our God is always good, always kind, always giving and always seeking the best for us and loves us way beyond our imagining. Remember who God is.

Third remember to keep God before your mind.

What occupies our minds very largely shapes how we are and what we do. So set the Lord before you. Keep Him in your mind. King David said in Ps 16.8, : *I keep the LORD in mind always. Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken*

You can learn to do this, you can bring God before your mind constantly and train yourself to have Him there always. One simple approach is to train yourself to go through a morning repeating to yourself, every 15 minutes or so, "Hallowed be Your name" or some other phrase that's a trigger for you, put some coloured dots around as triggers, on your mobile, laptop, car dashboard, whatever. And when you bring God to mind, think of God rightly, keep thinking about the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit as that community radiant with the glory of the goodness of their life together, infinitely generous, utterly self-giving and so on....Anybody want to go to heaven? Now is the time to do it, by keeping God before you because heaven is where God is at and where what God wants happens. Keep God before your mind. Remember what occupies our minds very largely shapes how we are and what we do

Fourth remember you need a plan to grow

To be a disciple is is literally to be “one who is learning”. These are lifelong tasks – when we cease to learn and grow our discipleship is stunted and we stagnate, just as surely as my piano-playing is stunted and stagnant. Commit to at least one course of faith formation each year, get help on what might be helpful to grow as a Christian – try a discipline like not having the last word – I've tried it and I was amazed, people actually survived. Or learn how to be kind to people who really irritate you, or to speak well of those who take your name in vain. Get a plan, your ministers are here to help.

I need to be blunt with you – coming to church on a Sunday is important – but it's not enough. You need a plan for spiritual growth. If you plan and act on your plans, there is every possibility Jesus will grow in you and His character will become more and more your character. Then you will routinely and easily do the things Jesus did and said to, and you will be well down the road of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever.

Clare, Vanessa, Jordan, Liam, Michelle, remember who you are, remember who God is, keep this God in mind always and make a plan to grow. OK?