

The Father Heart of God

Caversham Baptist Church
4 September 2016

For my entire working life, since I went to live in India for five months at the age of 18, I have worked with teenagers. In India I was a volunteer teaching social studies, PE and the clarinet. I also helped out in a dorm and ran it on my own every Tuesday.

When I returned to New Zealand, I ran the youth group here and also started working with youth groups and youth ministry leaders throughout Otago and Southland in my role with Baptist Youth Ministries.

At the beginning of 1998 Karene and I got married and started living in the boarding house at John McGlashan College. After a short time there I began relief teaching and I'm now doing that at King's High School where I've had the privilege of teaching both Ella and Noah.

During community time last week Karene made you aware of the sporting success some of our children and teenagers had had recently and encouraged you to ask them about it. You might like to put this week's question to Ella: "How can your father teach you at King's when you're a girl?"

In 2009 I began working for the Corstorphine Baptist Community Trust, an organisation that people from this church, and other Baptist Churches in Dunedin, began in the 1970s to support people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness to live well in the community. Six nights every fortnight I get paid to sleep at Te Whakaruruhau, a service for teenagers. I call it my dream job.

Since 1992 I have worked with thousands of different young people, mostly boys, but plenty of girls as well. On Wednesday I had a conversation with a guy I taught maths to during my placement at King's in 2003. He made my life as difficult as he possibly could back then so I took great delight in telling him how much I enjoyed having a positive relationship with him now.

I've dealt with many difficult characters over the years and seen some appalling behaviour. I've learned that there is always an explanation for this. It's a symptom of something that is not right in the life of a young person. If I dig a little, I usually find that all is not well at home and, more often than not, it has something to do with the father.

In 1984 my sister, Rebekah, had a friend around for a sleepover. Dad was in good form that night and Rebekah's friend was obviously enjoying her time with our family. She actually commented that she wished she had our father instead of hers. While that made me incredibly proud of my Dad it made me feel very sad for her and her father.

At best, our fathers can give us a glimpse of what God is like because our earthly fathers shape our view and understanding of God.

If you had an extremely authoritarian father then you tend to view God as a harsh disciplinarian who will punish you for every misstep.

If you always found your father quite distant and difficult to relate to then that's how you'll see God – he's out there, a long way away and not really interested in you as a person.

If you got on really well with your father then you find it easy to accept the loving side of God's nature but you may not appreciate his righteousness and his holiness.

If you grew up without a father then you'll find it easy to feel a sense of abandonment when things don't go well and God seems far away.

Our earthly fathers shape our view and understanding of God.

This morning I want to focus on three encounters that Jesus had with his Father and look at how they affected him. The first encounter is recorded in Matthew, chapter 3.

Matthew 3:13-17 (read by Eugene)

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?'

¹⁵ Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

Here we see the trinity in action: Jesus, the man, the Son of God, goes through a ritual associated with repentance and obedience that is still practised today; the Spirit of God descends like a dove and settles, or comes to rest, on him; and then the father's voice is heard from heaven – "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Then we see in the next stage of Jesus's life what this encounter with the Father had prepared him for:

Matthew 4: 1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'

⁴ Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."' '

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."'

⁷ Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ⁹ ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”’

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The encounter with the Father and the empowering of the Holy Spirit gives Jesus the strength to go without food for forty days and forty nights and then resist temptation by the devil.

Jesus is able to resist the temptation of the devil because he has taken the time to learn the Scriptures, he has spent time with the Father and he has allowed the Holy Spirit to determine the course of his life. This is the model he wants us to follow.

It’s a significant time in the life of Jesus because he is being prepared for his ministry to others. Satan offers Jesus things that human beings are naturally drawn to but his time with the Father has given Jesus a heavenly perspective so he has a totally different agenda.

An encounter with the Father gives us strength, helps us resist temptation, gives us a heavenly perspective and helps us focus outwardly, on the needs of others.

The second encounter between Jesus and his heavenly Father is recorded in Matthew 16 and 17.

Jesus Predicts His Death

Matthew 16:21

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-9

¹⁷ Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Let me talk to you about default settings. Those of you who own a computer will know about default settings. I hope you've changed yours because default settings like Arial and Times New Roman are just plain ugly!

A few years ago I changed the default setting in my email programme to **blue Trebuchet text with a yellow background**. I thought it looked great – and showed my true colours – but I had to change my default settings when I found out that someone I had to email on a regular basis was printing every email I sent and chewing through his colour cartridges because of me!

Peter's default setting on the Mount of Transfiguration was to keep the moment to himself. This was an amazing spiritual experience. Moses finally got to set foot on the Promised Land and Jesus showed that he was the fulfilment of both the Law and the Prophets by talking to Moses and Elijah about what the future held for him in Jerusalem. Peter was having such a good time he wanted to stay up there and make it last as long as possible. Kind of like the feeling you have on the Sunday afternoon at Easter Camp – you're having a great time with a great bunch of people and you don't really want to go back to the real world. But if Peter had had an outward focus he would have wanted his fellow disciples – those at the bottom of the mountain - to experience it.

The default settings of human beings are generally very self-centred. Unfortunately, that doesn't always change when we become Christians and so churches, like a lot of other organisations, end up spending a huge amount of their resources – time, money and energy – on themselves.

That's why I think it's really important that we employ Julian Doorey to work in the area of outreach. If I was a pastor, I would look to employ someone in the area of outreach before I'd employ a youth pastor, children's pastor or administrator because the default setting of every group of people, no matter how good their intentions are, is to spend most of their time looking after themselves.

The default setting of individual Christians, of home groups and of churches is to get comfortable and want to keep things the way they are. And when churches make that choice too often they eventually die. Dunedin is littered with the buildings of churches like this. Churches that decided in one way or another that the needs of those on the inside were more important than the needs of those on the outside. If we don't maintain a strong outward focus in time we'll go exactly the same way.

On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus was setting himself for what lay ahead in Jerusalem. Again, this encounter with the Father, along with Moses and Elijah, is giving him strength for what it is to come when the temptation to follow in the steps of Jonah, and head in the opposite direction, would have been very strong.

We have to understand that Jesus not only knew he was going to die, but he knew the Scriptures and knew he was going to die a brutal and violent death. The Romans might not have been able to count to three in a hurry – I, II, III – but they knew how to torture people and make death as painful as possible. One of the main purposes of crucifixion was to act as a warning to others that they

should keep the peace. The message was loud and clear – mess with Rome and this is how things will end up for you. It was designed to keep the masses under control.

Jesus's dramatic spiritual experience on the Mount of Transfiguration gives him a heavenly, and eternal, perspective. Death will be painful, brutally painful, but it will be followed by resurrection. The way of the cross is essential if lost sinners are to know the forgiveness that can only be found in him.

Gethsemane

Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'

³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'

⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. ⁴¹ 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.'

⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'

One of the things parents do when their children are suffering is cry out to God, "Can there be another way?" I know this, because my parents have prayed it on my behalf when I've been going through tough times and I've heard of plenty of other people doing it. It's natural and it reminds us of Jesus's humanity – he knew what was facing him and he desperately wanted to avoid it. Somehow, during this time with the Father when Jesus is desperately bargaining with God and seeking a way out death, he finds the strength to stay his course. The temptation to get as far away from Jerusalem as he possibly could would have been very strong.

And again, he gains a heavenly perspective on what is about to happen – "May your will be done". Jesus is about to make the ultimate sacrifice for others – giving up his life for them – and this time with the Father keeps him focused on that.

Every preacher must answer two questions through their message. What do I want you to know and what do I want you to do?

What do I want you to know?

I want you to know that baptism is a mark of repentance and obedience. Because Jesus did it, when we choose to follow him we must do it too.

I want you to know that the things you dwell on will shape the course of your life. If you read the paper more than you read the Bible then you'll have a great general knowledge but you won't reach your full potential for God. If you fill your life with people but don't make time for the Father then there'll be nothing supernatural about your existence. If you make lots of effort to consume stuff from television but you make no effort to open your life to the Holy Spirit then you'll limit your effectiveness for the Kingdom.

What do I want you to do?

I want you to do what Jesus did. I want you to make time with the Father a priority in your life. I want the holiness of the Father, the righteousness of the Father, the forgiveness of the Father and the love of the Father to be increasingly present in your life. That is what it means to follow Jesus. Time with the Father will strengthen your resolve to follow Jesus. Time with the Father will help you resist temptation. Time with the Father will change your perspective on things – increasingly, you'll see your life from his perspective and your own selfish tendencies will wane. Time with the Father will grow your heart and you'll become passionate about the needs of others.

A few weeks ago, we heard back from some of our young people who had been to an Xtend Camp up at Living Springs, near Christchurch. One of the girls who went said that she'd never experienced the power of the Holy Spirit before.

Over the last few weeks, those of us who have been planning our time together this morning have been praying that it would be significant. We want to give you the opportunity now to respond to the love of the Father.

There may be people here who have never done this before. If you've become aware of how much the Father loves you this morning and you want to be put right with him, through Jesus, then I want to invite you to come up the front this morning.

If, on the other hand, you want to experience a fresh encounter with the Father that will give you supernatural strength, the ability to resist temptation, a heavenly perspective and an outward focus then I want to encourage you to respond this morning too. You don't have to go to Easter Camp or Xtend or to an expensive Christian conference overseas. The Holy Spirit is present here this morning and wants to touch hearts and minds.

The words that have kept coming to me as I've been thinking about today are that we need our hearts to be flooded by the love of the Father. The Holy Spirit can do this this morning wherever you are, but I think there's something special about praying with someone else, so if this is your desire this morning – for your heart to be flooded by the love of the Father – then I want to invite you to come forward while we're worshipping the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.