

## Gisborne 15 Sept 2019 Congregational Story and Reflection

Congregational Story Time: **GOOD, BRIGHT, BEAUTIFUL, GROWING**

Today we have some wonderful flowers here that are going to be given to the older members of our congregation, including those who because of illness or the difficulty they have walking or moving, are not able to come to church – but they are still part of us – and on this day, once a year, people take them the flowers as a special gift from the church that says, you still belong to us and we care about you. We also give some of the flowers to younger people who are unwell or need something bright and beautiful in their lives or to whom we want to say thank you for something they have done.

Flowers are a wonderful symbol of all that is good and bright and beautiful in the world today. Genesis 1 records a story of how God made the world. Here are the words from Genesis 1: 11 – 12 that tell about plants, including flowers - *God said “let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that bear grain and those that bear fruit” – and it was done. So the earth produced all kinds of plants and God was pleased. God said it was good.* In chapter 2 of Genesis there is another different story about creation and in verse 9 it says *God made all kinds of beautiful trees grow and produce good fruit.*

Good, bright and beautiful – and growing. We know that some flowers and trees grow for a long time – like the kauri tree in New Zealand. Some of the kauri trees are hundreds or even thousands of years old- although sadly some of those ancient trees are now suffering because of people getting too close and transferring disease. Other plants live a much shorter time. You can plant a lettuce seed and it grows into a lettuce big enough to eat in a couple of months. Radishes grow even more quickly. Some grasses grow, produce seed heads and then wither away in a few weeks. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah [40:8] tells us that grass withers and flowers fade but the word of our God endures for ever. God’s message of love and caring does last for ever and encourages us to live in a loving and caring way too. In the letter from James, in the New Testament part of the Bible, it tells us that God plants God’s word in our hearts. That means that we know deep inside that God loves us - and that God wants us to love and care for other people.

God knows us really well and can see who we really are, deep inside. God can see the hidden potential in us. God can help us love and care for other people and to keep growing in God’s way – good, bright and beautiful.

When we look at a seed or a bulb, we cannot see what is inside that will grow into a much bigger plant. Just like the seeds and the bulbs, we have the potential to grow into something good and beautiful – something God alone can see.

We are going to say some words about that: *Something God alone can see*

... (ST A: And then sing a New Zealand version of *All Things bright and beautiful*)

*Before Reflection - Sing: How much am I worth? What’s the value in me?*

Reflection: **‘LOOK HOW THE WILD FLOWERS GROW’**

- *The glory of flowers. God sees all is good.*
- *flowers shared say ‘we care about you’ – a symbol of all beauty, and a reminder of connections and caring*
- *lost but searched for – you are precious to God.*
- *how are you growing? What about fruit? Galatians 5: 22 – 23*
- *what kinds of seeds are you sowing through the Spirit of God?*

Readings: Matthew 6: 26 – 30 GNB Luke 15: 1 – 10 GNB

You are worth everything in the eyes of God. That was a key message Jesus gave in many different ways. We can imagine Jesus on the hillside with people gathered around him and he pointed out to them things they could see in that place – birds flying and plants growing. Jesus noted that food is provided for the birds even though they do not work for it and that flowers are so beautiful – more beautiful than the great hero king Solomon, renowned amongst the Jewish people for his wealth and wisdom. Because he was so rich he had an amazing collection of clothing and glory seemed to surround him. The message was clear – God makes things that are far more beautiful than anything made by humans.

When we go back to the stories in Genesis we find that repeated statement – God saw that it was good – everything was good. When we look at beautiful flowers, we can see the amazing way in which they are constructed, the glorious colours and the wonderful variety. Giving flowers to someone says I care about you. Giving flowers is often a symbol of something deeper – love, thanks, appreciation and caring. Giving and receiving flowers reminds us of the connections between the giver and receiver and the caring represented.

A deep caring was shown in the stories Jesus told about lost things. We know this is a trilogy of stories but today we heard the first two and not the third. The first story is about a lost sheep. Jesus tells it in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They were saying “Jesus welcomes outcasts – people on the edge of society - and even eats with them.” That is not something the Pharisees and teachers of the Law themselves would do because they rated people by what they looked like and they did not associate with those they looked down on. There were strict religious rules about who was unclean and who had to live away from others because of fear of disease or even because of the work they did. These people were considered to be outcasts – cast out from the rest of society. Yet Jesus welcomed everyone, including the outcasts, and these Jewish leaders were grumbling about that. So Jesus told them a story. He didn’t argue or state his case. He simply told a story and left the hearers to make the connections with what they were saying and thinking.

Jesus’ first story starts with something that everyone listening would recognise and agree with - one lost sheep out of a hundred was precious. The owner would go and search for it and then celebrate when it was found. Jesus made the point, without having to say it, that God cares about and looks for the one in a hundred who has lost their way, strayed off the path, become an outcast, and is not counted as respectable by others. This was not

about ownership of a flock but about celebration of someone's life being turned around – and all people being welcome in the kingdom of God.

The second story appears to be about money – a silver coin - but it too has a much deeper meaning. Women in the time of Jesus wore their dowry, their precious family heirlooms, on a head band – kept visible and close. Losing one of ten silver coins was not just about losing one coin. The coin stood for family and relationship, it was the symbol of marriage – like a ring today. So a woman who lost one of her precious coins would search all the dark corners of her house until she found it. Again there was celebration. If we had read the third story you would note that there too was a huge celebration.

You may recall that the third story appears to be about one lost son, often called the prodigal son – one out of two – and yet both are lost in different ways. The son who asks his father for his share of the inheritance is really saying to his father “I wish you were dead so I could have the money that is coming to me” – but the father gives it to him anyway, knowing that he will probably squander it, and not value the gift. He does this out of love. The son goes off to a far country, wastes all the money and then comes back, seeking forgiveness. He is forgiven but also welcomed with a celebratory feast. Meanwhile his brother has been working hard, doing his duty – and being resentful – and his resentment boils over when he sees the feast that his father gives for the son who has not worked hard, who has wasted his father's money, and who dares to come home again with nothing.

Jesus is saying with these stories that God sees differently, God welcomes everyone, God forgives and God celebrates when the lost is found. One lost one found out of a hundred is a cause for celebration, one lost and found out of ten is a cause for celebration, one lost and found out of two – is also a huge cause for celebration - or maybe it is both lost – and yet we don't have the end of the story from the resentful son's point of view. That part is left unfinished. Yet Jesus is saying that everyone matters, everyone is of value in God's sight. God searches for all the lost and reaches out to all.

Have you ever felt lost? Perhaps you have been physically lost? - maybe in a strange country you could not find your way to where you wanted to go or maybe as a child you suddenly realised you were separated from your parents, in a park or an unfamiliar building or a shopping mall. When we are physically lost panic can set in and fear can overtake us. Our God of love and compassion can take away our fear. If you ever are lost like that, trust God and look for the practical help that others can offer in God's name.

Maybe you are lost in the sense of being lonely. We could describe that as an emotional 'lostness'. Feeling alone and bereft of someone special in your life can be very disabling and a cause of deep pain. God our rock offers comfort and strength to help us to cope.

But maybe some of you feel spiritually lost? Perhaps your mind is plagued by doubts or questions that nag away at the certainty you once had. Many of us grew up with a particular image of God that may have been challenged as we grew older or learned new things. I am aware that for many people one traditional image of God as judge, watching to see when we made mistakes, is very scary and uncomfortable – yet it may have been the

picture of God that was given to you in your younger days. The God of love I know wants to surround us with assurance and peace, not fear.

God welcomes us whatever we have done, and celebrates with us that we are part of God's family – just as the finding of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and the bringing together of the father and two lost sons were all a cause for celebration. God's love reaches out to us in many ways, including through those around us who allow the Spirit of God to work through them.

We have talked about this recently but let me remind you again of what the Spirit of God can do in your life. Galatians 5 tells us that *the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control*. Those are antidotes to feeling lost, they are all aspects of life that help us to feel we belong, that we are in control of our lives and emotions, and that we can share with others.

Let's link this with the wild flowers growing. Jesus talked about beautiful growth happening, without us working at it or maybe even being aware of it. God makes the wild flowers grow. Some of you may be more familiar with the phrase 'the lilies of the field' which appears in other translations. Botanists say that in the time of Jesus, in Palestine, whole families of flowers were referred to as 'lilies of the field' but they all grew wild - Palestinian chamomile for example was a common plant of daisy like appearance and it grew everywhere but there were also varieties of lilies, anemones, iris, narcissus, hyacinth and cyclamen that grew wild.

Some of you will have seen the wild flowers in Western Australia. They grow without anyone cultivating them and they just appear from the earth when the conditions are right. Wonderful and beautiful. Are you growing like that? - and producing the kind of fruit that shares love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self control with all you meet? That is a cause for celebration.

As well as growing and producing fruit, maybe on this day when we give flowers to say we care about you, we can also think about other seeds growing. You can sow seeds in the lives of others through the Spirit of God.

The Loving Spirit of God has chosen you to be and God's sign is upon you. May that Loving Spirit guide you and bring you back to the fold if you feel lost. God loves you and you belong to God. God bless you. Amen

The choir sings: *Loving Spirit*