**Sermon 20 August 2023 Imagination and Wonder**

This morning we are continuing with the study of the book “Be Still” which is intended to help us with our quiet times with God. The chapters that we are looking at today are imagination and wonder.

Jesus was a master story teller. He often taught using parables. The four gospels record 46 occasions when Jesus used a story to teach a lesson. He used simple, culturally relevant stories that engaged the listener’s imagination, so that he could illuminate a spiritual truth. He revealed the heart and nature of God to his listeners through these parables.

As people listened, they could visualise exactly what Jesus was talking about; they would be fully engaged, picturing the many day to day objects, people, situations and activities that Jesus referred to. As Jesus told these stories, those who listened used their imagination, perhaps picturing themselves in the setting he described. Just as this helped them to understand the point Jesus was trying to make, our imagination will help us when it comes to engaging with the stories of the Bible.

We have looked at mind wandering and how we can easily be distracted in our quiet time. The other side of the coin is how our imagination can help us in our quiet time and in connecting with God. In order to do this, we need to get our imagination working better, to make it a useful tool in developing an understanding of God and a means of encountering God.

Images speak to us, images such as paintings, photographs, TV and films - we are all impacted by images. For a long period of time the only visual images available were paintings. We have all been to art galleries and seen the many paintings of Jesus with his disciples, of Mary with baby Jesus and many others. This use of paintings at a time of poor literacy was very helpful for people to understand Scripture and also to better understand God. But how does this help us now in our world now which looks different to how it would have looked in Jesus’ time?

What we can do is to try and place ourselves in the stories of the Bible. So, we will look at the passage read to us earlier by Pat and try to imagine that we are there. In verse 40 Jesus has returned and is welcomed by a crowd who were expecting him. Imagine that you are one of the crowd. How would you feel? Would you be excited or apprehensive, would you be nervous? What time of day is it? Would you try to go to the front or would you stay nearer the back? Then Jairus, a synagogue leader comes to Jesus and falls at his feet and begs Jesus to come to his house because his 12 year old daughter is very ill. Can you imagine yourself as Jairus? He is a leader in a responsible position in the synagogue but he knows Jesus. He has received some terrible news – we all know what it is like to receive news like that. So, Jesus sets out to go to Jairus’ house and the crowd go with him, almost crushing him. What does that feel like if you are in the crowd, you want to stay close to Jesus and you don’t want to lose sight of him. Is there a lot of noise? In verse 43 a woman who had been bleeding for many years comes up behind Jesus. She has a debilitating condition and she would have been considered unclean and an outcast in the society of the time. Can you imagine how she feels, no-one could heal her. She approaches Jesus, touches his cloak, just one touch and she is healed instantly. When Jesus asks who touched him, she is afraid but nevertheless falls before him and tells him why she touched him and how she had been healed. Jesus tells her that her faith has healed her. Do you identify with this woman? People we know and some of us may have physical, mental, emotional or spiritual conditions where just one touch would be all we need.

Then someone brings the news to Jairus that his daughter has died. Can you imagine what Jairus must be thinking and feeling now? Can you imagine what it is like to be the messenger here? Being the messenger, particularly bringing bad news can be a difficult role to carry out. But Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, just believe and she will be healed” (v49). When they arrived at the house, Jesus made the crowd wait outside. If you are in the crowd, you would be mourning the death of the child. But Jesus tells them not to mourn as the girl is asleep. Their response is to laugh, because the situation seemed impossible. What would you have thought? But inside the house with Jairus and his wife, Peter, John and James, Jesus took the girl by the hand and told her to stand up and she did. As a member of the crowd, you have just witnessed a healing miracle.

This is something to do in your quiet time.

Find a passage from one of the gospels where Jesus is spending time with other people.

Remember that we are engaging with and encountering the word of God. – the word of God which has life and power.

Be still and remember he is present. We need God to illuminate what we are about to read. It is helpful to acknowledge his presence by saying ‘Thank you God that you are here.

Name and tame any distractions, think about breathing and posture.

Read through the passage three or more times and try to picture the details.

Close your eyes and reconstruct the scene in your imagination. Then, observe what is happening. Ask yourselves questions as we did earlier, such as what is the time of day, the outside temperature, the environmental conditions. Is it noisy? What is Jesus doing and how are people reacting and interacting with him. Place yourself in the scene in whichever way you want, as we did earlier.

When you have finished it will be helpful to pray and express what you have seen and felt from this time and what emotions you felt.

We are now going to look at wonder. Our attention in today’s world is being demanded by many different sources driven by consumerism. Advertisers tell us to look for and aspire to more. Phone providers, news outlets, retail chains, charities and social media all clamour for our attention. So, our attention is constantly diverted and our devotion can be pulled in all sorts of directions. We need to stop and resolve to be more intentional with our attention. So, we must slow down, notice what is around us and start looking for God in the ordinary things of life, not the spectacular ones. Wonder is the ability to stop and look around us, it is a feeling of amazement and admiration caused by something beautiful, remarkable or unfamiliar.

It is possible that the millions of photographic images available now have taken away our ability to wonder at the ordinary, so that life only looks good through a filter. A filtered life can rob us of wonder and our appreciation of beauty can become distorted. There is beauty in the very ordinary things of life. We need to stop, see the beauty and wonder.

To do this, we need to notice what is around us. Genesis 28 tells the story of Jacob who at this point had cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance. On his parent’s advice he decided to leave the area and go to his relatives in Harran. On his way there at nightfall he reached a certain place and stopped for the night and found a stone as a pillow in the desert. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway reaching up to heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending the ladder and at the top of the ladder was the Lord. The Lord told him he will give him the land on which he is lying and the land beyond that in all directions. Jacob and his descendants will be a blessing to all and the Lord will not leave Jacob until the Lord has done what he has promised. When Jacob woke up, he thought: “Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it”. He was afraid and said “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

We need to increase our awareness of God. Jacob went to a certain place in the desert, but once he was aware that God was there, it became an awesome place and he expresses profound awe. This is worship. Noticing leads to wonder and wonder leads to worship.

So how can we notice more, in order to give our attention to God and live a life of wonder.

First of all, take time to reflect: look back and consciously take note of where you saw God. At the end of the day ask yourself where you saw God. If you keep a journal it may help to read back and identify where you found God. Looking back helps us to notice God in what has passed, but it also trains us to notice God in the present.

Secondly, look up: at some point each day, stop and look up. Go for a walk, look out of the window, stop and look around and try to notice God.

Thirdly, look forward. As Christians we live with the confidence that Jesus will come again, the world will be made new and at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. He has placed eternity in our hearts. If at times we look back and feel pain, look up and see clouds, we can always look forward and see hope. A quiet time with the Lord, reading Scripture should make us people of hope and people who look forward.

It is also important to give thanks. In our materialistic society we need to cultivate a culture of gratitude and be thankful for what we have. 1 Thessalonians 5 v18 says this: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”. Thankfulness leads to worship. Although what we see can inspire awe and wonder, worship is also a conscious act of the will, a choice we make. The Bible, especially the Psalms are full of reference to expressing our worship to God through music and song. Whether you sing to God in the shower, quietly come before him in reverent awe or something in between, make it a conscious act of will to worship him.

Life is full of bumps, some big, some small, some that we saw coming and could have avoided and some that were a complete shock. As a result, if we feel that we have lost any sense of wonder, we need to re-align. As we give our attention to God: to notice him in the ordinary as well as the spectacular, to reflect and give thanks, we will develop o greater understanding of his majesty, of his lordship, of his power, of his love and of his presence.

These are some questions to help us think about the role of wonder in our lives:

How would you describe your pace lately? Has it been go, go, go or do you stop to look up and notice God around you.

When was the last time we stopped and noticed the beauty in something ordinary?

Think back over the last month – where have we especially seen God, where can we see God in creation and/or in another person?

What practices of thankfulness do we have in our quiet times?

How do we best express our worship that is authentic and God centered?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, that you have given us your word and thank you that you have given us imagination. We pray that you will guide us in developing our imagination and help us to notice you in the ordinary day to day things, so that we may see you more clearly and love you more dearly, day by day. In Jesus name Amen

The last two lines of the next hymn are: ‘till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.’