

Good God, Good Church: Christlikeness - 27th February 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Morning. It's a bit West Country that one, wasn't it? Morning. Hello, my name's Matt. I'm the vicar here at St. John's. Good to be with you today. And we've reached the final week in this series we've been doing for the last couple of months called Good God, Good Church. It's a series in which we've been exploring the mixed and at times meaty ways in which we might be able to grow into the good church that God would long for us to be.

So last week, Dave over there helpfully took us through the idea of service. In other weeks, we've been looking at things like justice, the importance of truth-telling. We've looked at the importance of prioritising people. We've explored grace and how that ties in with generosity, as well as thinking about compassion and empathy. And in this week, to round it all off in some ways, we're going to be looking at the theme of Christ-likeness. In other words, what it means to be a church which is like Jesus. But this whole list that we can see encompasses, I guess, a number of important qualities which, when taken together, help to build up a picture of what a good church may well look like. And I'm aware that even with this kind of list and over the last few weeks, there are many other qualities that we could have included, but we haven't done so. So in some ways, we've only just scratched the surface of what it means to be a good church. But in other ways, I guess that's the point, really. Being or becoming a good church is inevitably a work in progress where there's always more to come. Indeed, when we read the Bible, the original writers of that seem to appreciate that this word good implies within it a sense of progress. So for example, the Hebrew word, which our Bibles translate into English as good, is the word tov. Want to speak some Hebrew this morning? Let me hear you say tov. Beautiful, beautiful. Now, we'll have more to come, I promise you.

But tov contains ideas of something being good if it's well-crafted. So in Genesis, where the word good, the word tov appears a lot, God's creation is described as tov. And God saw that it was good, tov in Hebrew. God's creation was tov, partly because it was so nicely done, so well-crafted. It was pleasing. You know, all expressions which are tied up with this word, tov. But interestingly, in describing creation as tov, as good in English, creation isn't described as being perfect.

[2 : 56] No, because I guess that implies that it could never be improved. And yet, we know that as gardens grow, as forests mature, as new life is born, as creatures evolve, there is a sense in which God's good creation is still progressing. Creation, by its nature, is a work in progress. There's always room, it seems, for change and for creative improvement. So that's what the Hebrew word for good, tov, is all about. The idea of goodness as being something which is pleasing and well-crafted, but also where there's scope for progress. Now, how does this tov idea relate to what it means to be a church? Well, I guess if we're a good church under a good God, the aim is to be a tov church, church which is pleasing, which is creative, which is well-crafted. Church is therefore, really, a group of people who are growing together with God. But that also means that at the same time, we're fully aware that because there's scope always to grow, we're by no means perfect.

In fact, by definition, church is very much always a work in progress. And that, for me, I think, is a helpful way to think about church life, which is good. Because if we are indeed a work in progress, it kind of takes the pressure off a bit for us to be the finished article. Instead, being a tov church, being a church which is a creative work in progress, there's bound to be missteps along the way.

There's bound to be a process of trial and error, wrong turns, you know, mistakes at time along the way. I guess we could say tov sees goodness as progress, not perfection.

And I've got to be honest with you, I am quite a perfectionist. I'm a nightmare to live with, to be honest. It's terrible. And I'm hard to work with as well at times. I know. But so I find the idea of

church being about progress, not perfection quite hard. Because it's not something I find easy. I don't like making mistakes and all that comes with that. But the nature of being a work in progress means that I am going to make mistakes and we are going to make mistakes collectively along the way.

[5 : 34] So the challenge, I guess, is to ask God to show us where and why perhaps we go wrong, but to bring good, to bring progress out of those mistakes.

Equally though, I guess being a work in progress means that our growth as a church under God won't always be consistent. Instead, we'll have times of plenty, fruitful seasons, but we'll also have fallow seasons. There'll be seasons of activity, but also seasons of rest and recovery.

And I guess the older I get, speaking as a 46-year-old geriatric these days, the older I get, the longer I'm here as well. I think the more I realise that this idea of fruitful times and fallow times, actually that's good. That's tov. Because the change in the seasons, you know, a time for this and a time for that, to paraphrase Ecclesiastes, that seems to be part of the way in which God is at work in our lives. And I think that's how I'm coming to terms with what the last couple of years have all been about, with the pandemic, how it's affected us as a church here at St. John's.

So yes, there have been multiple signs of real growth. You know, there's been fruitfulness coming through, whether that's online, certainly, in our community engagement, through social care and Burn and Be a Friend.

Pastoral care, I think that's been positive. There's been growth, I think, generally, in just realising how much we might have missed meeting together, and it's good to be back together in these recent weeks. There's been good things like the Monday service and dropping.

[7 : 15] There's been little friends, which is back up to capacity, really, on both Wednesdays and Thursdays. Ruth's been a great addition to us, brought a new freshness with her. So there's lots of good signs of new stuff and good growth going on. And in spite of so much upheaval, that's not a God. That's God's goodness in a way that is pleasing and creative and can be seen in a number of ways. But there's also been things over the last couple of years that are not like a field of wheat or anything, but it's been more dormant, more fallow, should we say. So we haven't been able to run the community events that we would have liked to, the summer play days in the park or Christmas fairs and services and so on, which had to be shelved. Plans to improve the building.

We want to change the windows because they're rotting and getting knackered, but that's taken a while. That's really stalled over the last couple of years. Bringing new people through into new roles without services in person, that's been quite hard to get momentum going with that and so on.

So there have been fruitful times, yeah, but there's also been fallow times as well. And that's okay. I think that's good. That's tov. Same applies to us as individuals, perhaps, as well. We don't always have to be feeling fruity every day of the year. We don't have to be flourishing all the time. In fact, I'm glad we're not. I'm glad I'm not surrounded by people who come in through the door and you sort of say, Hayden, I'm awesome. How are you?

Everything's like, oh, 100% and that would be unbearable, I think, if that was the case. Every week of everyone being awesome every moment of every day of every week. It'd be impossible to relate to, I think. Instead, in thinking about what it means to be a Jesus kind of church, a Christ-like church, I think we do well to remember that even Jesus was a work in progress. I mean, if you think about it, he didn't arrive on the scene as an adult. No, he spent years, decades even, being crafted, if you like, you know, maturing, or as the Bible puts it, growing in wisdom and stature. That means he must have got more wise as he got older. Now, before starting his public ministry at the age of about 30, Jesus would have spent years in his teens and twenties absorbing his culture, working out how people tick, honing his craft and ideas as a teacher and a preacher, becoming more self-aware in how he related to others and so on. You know, Jesus himself, even the three or four years that we see him in action in the Gospels, he seemed to have fruitful, but also fallow seasons as well, times of public action, but also times of private reflection and rest.

And if that's Jesus' pattern for life, then that should be good enough for us too. So I wonder for you, over these last couple of years, perhaps in particular, but maybe in recent weeks, that's probably what it means for us to be a good church.

[10 : 36] How are you feeling at the moment in terms of you being a work in progress? Do you feel you're in a season where you are feeling productive and fruitful?

Do you feel fruity and so on? Yeah, would it flourish? Or does it feel actually a bit more fallow? There's not a lot of signs of life going on, not a lot of growth, it seems.

I think wherever we are, we know, farmers will tell us, fallow times are essential for future fruitfulness. So wherever we are, I think I want to say this morning that it'll be okay, it'll be okay. You know, all in good time is a good mantra, I think. Because the good news is that if we stay honest and open to God's voice, we can trust God to be working with us in whatever season, whatever time of fruitfulness or whatever time of fallowness we find ourselves. So thinking about what it means for us to be a good, Christ-like church, there's goodness as tov, a well-crafted goodness, which is okay with us being a work in progress.

[11 : 49] Secondly, though, we've done a bit Hebrew this morning, this word tov. I want to get us into some Greek this morning, if that's all right as well. Multilingual times this morning. Greek is a language which the New Testament was originally written in.

And what's interesting is that in the New Testament, there are at least two different words which we translate into English as good. One is the Greek word agathos.

We'll do some Greek again this morning. I want you to feel it, let me hear you say agathos.

Agathos. Lovely stuff. Now, agathos is where we get the name agatha from.

And it means good. But it means good in a kind of fundamental, kind of intrinsic way. But with apologies to any agathos out there. Agathos is a pretty basic, kind of standard way of saying good in Greek.

It's a bit clinical. It lacks a bit of colour, a bit of personality, shall we say. But there's another Greek word which is used for good in the New Testament, which we translate.

[12 : 54] And it's the word kalos. There you go. You're ahead of me. Let me hear you say kalos. Kalos. Bella. Now, kalos is much more interesting as a way of saying something's good.

Because it actually sees goodness as beauty. You know, something which draws us in. Something which captivates us.

And as such is far more an inspiring, sort of colourful way of talking about goodness. So with that in mind, with these agathos, basic goodness, kalos, beautiful goodness words in mind.

Going to watch a little clip from John's Gospel, chapter 10. And we'll see how this applies to this afterwards. Therefore Jesus said again, Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

[14 : 01] They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.

I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold.

I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice. And there shall be one flock and one shepherd. Now there's a lot in there.

[15 : 05] But for starters, when Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, the Greek word that's used for good, which one do you think it is? Is it agathos, sort of intrinsic goodness?

Or do you reckon it's kalos, beautiful goodness? Yes, it's kalos. Jesus as the good shepherd, therefore, is Jesus the captivating, beautiful, inspiring shepherd.

I don't know if you think of shepherds as being beautiful very often, but that seems to be the message that we're getting in this passage. And I like that. I like that, that Jesus is meant to be this captivating, enchanting almost shepherd.

It seems that Jesus' goodness as our shepherd is not so much focusing on right and wrong as he is about demonstrating a more beautiful way to live, a way which we as his sheep follow because we're attracted to Jesus, because we trust him, because we love him, and not simply because it's the right or objectively good thing to do.

And so what might that mean for us to be like Jesus, to be a good, kalos, truly beautiful church, which is captivating and inspiring?

[16 : 31] What might that look like? Well, you know as well as me that our culture today would say that beauty is normally tied up with perfection and sort of Botox options available are filling and

flesh out the lines and the wrinkles which inevitably come with age.

But if the way of God's created goodness, tov, is about progress, not perfection, I suspect the way of God's beautiful goodness is also about progress, not perfection.

What do I mean by that? Well, it's interesting that in the same passage that Jesus talks about himself being the good, beautiful shepherd, he also says that he has come that we may have life and have it to the full.

Now, what is the full life that Jesus has got in mind? Is it full as in perfect, full as in wrinkles filled with Botox to give the appearance of perfection?

Or is it full as in comprehensive, full as in with Jesus we're called and equipped to face and embrace the full reality of life in all of its ups and downs?

[17 : 53] See, I'd say it's the latter that Jesus is talking about. Life in all its fullness is a willingness to trust God with everything that we encounter.

All of the wrinkle creating stresses, but equally all of the joys which give us the smile lines around our eyes. Indeed, I'd say a church which is able to embrace the fullness of all the ups and downs of life because we have Jesus as our good shepherd, well, that is what will help to make us a truly beautiful, captivating, inspiring church.

See, Jesus' goodness was captivatingly beautiful, I think, because he was real. There was no filler, there's no faking it, no covering up his scars with Jesus, just a willingness to embrace the fullness of what this life is all about and therefore being a good church, being a kalos church, being a Christ-like church, well, that'll involve a similar willingness to be real.

That means we don't need a feel or fake who we are, how we're feeling, what we're going through, but rather we embrace those wrinkles, if you like.

We embrace our scars, even, because they bear witness to the faithful way in which Jesus, as our good shepherd, has been with us through all of life's ups and downs and will continue to lead us through.

[19 : 25] So goodness as progress, goodness as beauty, and then thirdly, and finally for today. That feels right in light of all this going on in Ukraine and we prayed earlier.

I just want to focus on this, as goodness, as peacemaking. To help out thinking with this is another little clip, just a short one from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, in which Jesus talks about what to do when faced with evil oppression.

You have heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

[20 : 33] You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

See, Jesus was and is the ultimate peacemaker, known as a Prince of Peace, who refused in his life on earth to meet violence with violence, even when his own life was being taken from him by the Romans.

And in that clip we've just seen, Jesus is teaching about the need not to take an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, not to take revenge, but instead to face evil oppression, not in a passive, meek kind of way, not in a violent way, but to face oppression by taking a third way, an altogether different approach.

And so he puts it like this famously. He says, if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. Now, I've touched on this before and you may remember it if so, but no apologies for that today because I think in light of all this going on, this is worth revisiting today. But the fact that Jesus says right cheek here, not just any old cheek, but he says right cheek, I think it's crucial to our understanding of this because in Jewish and Roman culture, each of your sides, in particular your hands, had very different symbolic and practical uses.

[22 : 08] So your right hand was your good one, okay? Your right hand was the positive one. It was clean. You'd use it to write, to eat, to do things that needed skill.

The right hand was the best one. The right hand was superior. Now, conversely, and unfortunately for us lefties, the left hand was deemed to be inferior.

It was seen as being unclean, primarily because, sorry to be graphic, but in the days before toilet paper, you used this hand to do your business with. So socially then, people knew that.

So if you used your left hand for anything, if anyone wants to shake your hand with a lefty, it'd be get away from me. I'm not touching that, thank you. Your left hand was dirty, it was seen as shameful, it was a huge source of embarrassment if you used it for anything sort of hygienic.

It was disgraceful to use your left hand in that kind of way. So, thinking of that, I need a volunteer, and I've, well, I've told Jack he's going to come forward, so it's not really a volunteer, but let's give Jack a round of applause as he comes forward, please.

[23 : 22] So we're going to do a little experiment here just to help us understand what Jesus is talking about with this right cheek stuff. And, I'm going to slap Jack on his right cheek, okay.

But because in the culture of Jesus' day, it would be shameful to use anything other than my right hand, I'm going to need a slap Jack on his right cheek with my right hand, not my left hand.

Okay. So, how can I do that? All right. I've got two options here. One is, I can do like we would normally do with a kind of palm facing. I can do that kind of thing, or I could do that, but there's not much force in that because your arm's all twisted.

So, the best way to slap Jack on his right cheek, should I wish to, is to use the back of my hand because I've got to use my right hand, remember. So, I would go like that, sound effects, Batman style, kapow.

All right, we go like that. We'll leave it there. All right. Now, what does that say? If I was to slap someone with the back of my hand, what kind of message does that give?

[24 : 42] It's a message which says, you're nothing to me. It's close, wasn't it? Sorry. It's a message which says, I'm your superior. It's the kind of thing that a Roman soldier would do to a Jewish peasant.

It's the kind of thing in those Roman times 2,000 years ago that a man would do to a woman, that a parent would do to a child. That a superior would do to a subordinate.

Someone of a different social standing to you, in other words. It's a way of saying, we've got a hierarchy here. You should learn from that. And I'm in charge, not you. Okay.

Now, remembering that, this is where Jesus' command to turn the other cheek is so clever.

Because having been hit on his right cheek with the back of his oppressor's hand, the victim can now say, all right, you want to hit me again, do you?

Hit my other cheek instead. Hit me as your equal. Because I know you think you're better than me because you did it with disdain, but I dare you to treat me as an equal.

[25 : 52] Because if you turn the other cheek, if I've now got to hit Jack's left cheek, cheek, if I use my right hand, we've got the same problem here. I'm going to have to do not that with the back of my hand because my elbow will all be kinked and stuff.

I've got to use the front of my hand to hit Jack's left cheek. And if I hit Jack like that, that's the kind of slap that you'd give to someone who you feel hurt by because you're emotionally involved with them.

It's the slap of someone who you feel equal to rather than disdain for. So when Jesus says give me your other cheek, he's saying, yeah, you might be asking them to hit you again, but you're asking them to hit you in a way which treats you as an equal, not as a subordinate.

Does that make sense? Does that make sense? Yeah. So even though they're still being attacked, they're saying, I'm not going to take it. I'm not going to take this line down. If you're going to attack me, you've got to see me as your equal.

You've got to see me in all my humanity. You've got to treat me as such. So it's not a doormat thing Jesus is saying at all, just take a beating. He's saying, assert yourself, assert your humanity, your equality, your dignity, your place in the social scheme as being equal with whoever is seeking to oppress you.

[27 : 19] All right. Thanks very much. Take a seat. Nice one. Thank you. So that's one thing. There's another two things which Jesus goes on to after this.

One about a guy being sued for the handing over his coat as well as his shirt that he's wearing. Another one about people taking what would be a Roman's backpack an extra mile than the mile perhaps they've been asked to do.

We haven't got time to go into those today. If you want to know the details of those, come and see me. But each of these little three things, the sleep jack, the sleep jacking, the cheek slapping, the taking your coat and your shirt and going the extra mile.

It's all three ways in which Jesus tells victims not to lie down and take it but to assert themselves as someone worthy of being seen as someone of value.

It's about shaming the oppressor by making them see you for the person you are not for the person they think you should be. And it seems to me that that kind of lesson of people who would, the oppressors would want to be victims actually asserting their right to be seen as whole people.

[28 : 29] That to me is what I think is in places and indeed should be happening in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. See Putin and his powers need to be shamed into retreating.

They need to be shamed into realising that the rest of the world is against their aggression and is not going to lie down and take it. They're not going to stand for it.

And so whether it's through things like we've seen in recent days like all the public protests which are going on not just in Ukraine but in Russian cities like St. Petersburg that takes real courage to do that under that regime.

Whether it's sporting occasions being taken off Russia. Whether it's economic sanctions and the freezing of financial assets of Putin's oligarch friends.

They're all ways to try to be assertive but to do it in peaceful but effectively resisting ways to the oppression of Putin trying to overcome another nation through force.

[29 : 37] It's trying to shame Putin into realising he won't win because the world is against it. Now I don't think in the meantime we can blame the people of Ukraine for taking up arms to fight the Russian invasion because in many ways I think the world has left it too late to shame Putin into retreats from his oppressive ways before this.

And you'll know as well as me but I want to say this this morning I think our own government has taken funding from Russian interests for far too long it's allowed billions to be laundered by Russian oligarchs throughout the city of London it's generally turned a blind eye to Russian influence of our elections through social media it's even installed Russian nationals with links to Putin into our house of lords you know all of those things it legitimises the corrupt practice of Russia and means that we as a country are at least in part to blame I think for giving Putin the confidence to invade Ukraine in the first place but all of that being what it is you know we are where we are with this conflict how might we therefore play our part and be a good church in line with Jesus' idea of what it means to be an active peacemaker well we can we can pray we can pray for and we can show our solidarity with everyday people in Russia and Ukraine praying for them to rise up in peaceful protest at the oppression they're under we can pray for courage for those in Putin's inner circle to shame him into seeing the error of his ways we can pressurise our own

MPs and politicians to stop indulging Russian corruption and instead push for the heaviest sanctions possible we can do all we can I think to invest in domestic renewable energy sources so that there's less and less reliance on Russian gas supplies and we can vote we can vote when the time comes regardless of our political views on the spectrum of things we can vote with things in mind that say we're never again going to elect officials who take dirty money from those who would seek to oppress others and you'll have other ways other things perhaps on your mind about things that we could do as well and yet in all of this I know it's heavy at the moment I know it's worrying it's even horrific kind of international times that we're living through I know for us as communities in this country aside from all that's going over on in Ukraine we're facing our own challenges as well through the healthcare crises the rising cost of living and so on and then for us as individuals we're faced with adapting to life which is at least in part shaped by issues of ongoing COVID and post-COVID fatigue and heightened social anxiety and all of that going on there's a lot on our plates at the moment locally as a country and internationally but I don't want to leave us or leave this series with anything other than a note of hope with where we're at and I can genuinely say that and I'll finish with this because in all that we face in all of the fullness of life shall we say in all of its ups and downs we journey through this life being called forward by the voice of the good shepherd Jesus the good God who embodies goodness as progress goodness as beauty and goodness as peace and who calls us to be a good church faithfully formed in his image so in the midst of everything that's going on may that be our story as we follow in the way the truth and the life of Jesus himself

Amen