

# Good God, Good Church: Prioritising People - 30th January 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] So from the start of the new year, Matt has been talking to us about how to make our church a good church. A church that inspires us to be good people. Not just a church that plays the best music or a church which is really fun to attend, but a church which helps all of us as church members to be more good and when we come together to shine that goodness into the community.

I must say, one of the things I've always found attractive about this church is that there is this huge culture of reaching out to the community.

Whether that was your parties in the park for people who were doing childcare over the summer holidays or there's little friends drop in and attempt to try and make the local park more fun.

There is this amazing culture of providing spaces in this church where people can come in, in whatever state they are in, and they'll be loved. And I think that's amazing. That's one of the best things that a church can be.

And I guess, so the part of being a good church that we're going to be talking about today is making a culture where we put people first and status, rules, hierarchies and institutions or the way we've always done things to the side if there's a human that's hurting and needs our attention first.

[ 1 : 23 ] So with an idea of where we're going, let's open the Bible. The passage that I'm focusing on today is from the fourth gospel, chapter two, and it's the last in a dramatic series of events where Jesus is challenging some interpretations of the Sabbath.

For all of you that don't speak churchy lingo, which is very sensible, don't learn it. The Sabbath is a Jewish tradition of resting for a whole day each week.

You're not allowed to do anything. You're not allowed to cook. You're not allowed to wash up. And in some orthodox circles today, you're not even allowed to turn the light bulbs on. So really, really rested. And I think it's a really radical way of saying, I'm not just about making money.

I'm not just about keeping a perfect house. I'm a human being. I'm a created being. And it's not my job just to control this part of the world. Instead, I need to step back and accept that God's in control.

So there are lots of good things about Sabbath, as well as challenging things about Sabbath.

Anyway, so we're going to watch this clip, and then I'm going to talk you through it, because I perhaps wouldn't interpret this passage in quite the way the video does.

[ 2 : 29 ] But I normally love the video. But we're going to watch the video, and then I'll talk you through it. One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the grain fields. And as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

The Pharisees said to him, Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? He answered, Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?

In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat.

And he also gave some to his companions. Then he said to them, So pretty dramatic, eh?

So we first have Jesus and his disciples walking through this beautiful cornfield. Really nice image there, wasn't it? And you have them kind of noshing a few ears of corn as they pass through the field.

[ 3 : 44 ] Now, as snacks go, I would like to raise you that this is not a very satisfying snack. So they must have been really hungry. But I guess a little bit of corn, raw corn, is better than nothing, probably.

And they meet some Pharisees, who are members of a Jewish religious sect, who were, at the time that Jesus was alive, exploring a lot of new ways of interpreting the law. And so the Pharisees come up to Jesus and they ask, Why are your disciples doing something that's unlawful on the Sabbath, which is harvesting grain?

I mean, are they really harvesting grain? They're just kind of noshing a little bit of it. So it seems a bit of a stretch of the question. In the video, you see Jesus kind of shouting at them. And there's kind of this aggressive music.

But I would like to raise to you that I don't think the Pharisees in this particular passage are asking in a very aggressive way. I think Jews have this culture of challenging each other about what is or isn't kosher.

And Judaism is this really interesting religion because instead of having a more top-down structure, all the children Jews are encouraged to ask questions and to debate the law from an early age.

[ 4 : 49 ] So you're allowed to challenge things. You're going to say, Why are you doing that? I wouldn't do it like that. And so Jesus responds by saying, So we're allowed to pick the corn because there's a precedent on this.

It happened in the Old Testament. And he mentions an episode where King David was kind of hiding out and leading a guerrilla army. Now, King David became the best king of Israel ever, really. But he, at the time, was kind of leading this rebellion. And I think that his troops were kind of surrounded on all sides and they were starving. And so David comes to the temple and he talks to the priest.

And the priests aren't supposed to be talking to David at all. So they're really very brave. And actually later, all of them, apart from Abiepher, are killed for talking to David and giving him bread. So they are very brave.

And they're compassionate. And they don't even ask the question. They say, We've got this consecrated bread. It's supposed to be only for the priests. Obviously, you're starving. So have it. They actually say, Have it as long as you've not had sex in the last two days.

[ 5 : 46 ] But we'll skip over that for another day. And so they give the bread to David and his men because they're starving. Now, if you're like me into references to the Old Testament and the New Testament, this is a really interesting one.

Because it might actually reference like five Old Testament passages at once. Or it could be that Jesus has got it a bit wrong. Either of those is really interesting as a thought. Because he says, When Abiathar was the great high priest, it wasn't Abiathar.

Abiathar is Elimelech's son. And it's Elimelech who's the high priest. But Abiathar also does some really interesting things later. But that is a proper nerdy sidebar. So come and chat to me about it after the service.

I have many thoughts. And before we go any further, I want to make a little bit of a disclaimer. Just so you know, I'm not saying something which it might sound like I'm saying. Which is, I don't really think that Jesus came to throw out huge sections of the Old Testament.

And I think it can be very easy to say, Judaism was this religion of rules. Jesus came to show us a path of love. But I think, especially this week when it's been Holocaust Memorial Day, you've got to be really careful of where that thinking goes.

[ 6 : 55 ] Because I think that Judaism is a religion of love. And I think Jesus, when he came, said, I come not to abolish but to strengthen the law of the prophets. And I think, so I think kind of what Jesus was doing is, he's not like throwing it out, but he's kind of putting some outlines in so you can see it more clearly.

Or maybe he's sharpening a photo. I think all the Old Testament is there, is really useful. Maybe not applied directly as it was today. But I think the stuff is there and Jesus is drawing it out.

He's kind of drawing out this thread of existing Jewish thinking. And he kind of points out that all of the rules in Judaism have this big caveat, which is drop everything if someone's hurting.

So for example, the example in the Good Samaritan, where you walk past someone on the side of the road who's hurt or in danger. If you don't help them, you become richly unclean. So you can't walk past someone who's hurting.

You're not allowed to come to church if you walk past someone who's hurting. That would be off.

And I think throughout the Old Testament, God gives us rules which encourage us to be loving to God and each other.

[ 8 : 07 ] So one of the classic examples is the rule of gleaning, which is that farmers, you've got this big field, but you're not allowed to harvest any of the bits you drop or any of the bits around the edge because there are other people who need those bits.

They're for the poor to gather, the people who haven't got anything to eat. That's Leviticus 19, 9-10. And people took less to enable others who didn't have enough to have more because in the end, that's the only way we stop people from starving, is having a little bit less.

And all these laws are called the Chesed laws, which means kind of loving kindness. And throughout all of this, the rules are about making sure others don't go hungry. Or in Deuteronomy, there's another really nice Chesed law, which is if someone borrows your cart and they kind of give you their coat as a kind of, here, have my coat and I'll bring your cart back by the end of the day. You have to give the coat back even if you don't get the cart back. And you have to give it back before sunset because in the night it gets cold and you're not allowed to leave people out in the cold.

And this rule was doubly blinding if the person who made the pledge was poor because the likelihood was he had no other coat to keep warm. So that's Deuteronomy 24.12.

[ 9 : 20 ] Graciousness, courtesy, compassion. This is loving kindness, which is one of the most important trump cards throughout the whole Old Testament. But this loving kindness, this awareness that we have to break all our rules if we see someone hurting in front of us, isn't always the way we live.

So what could that look like in practice? How could our church today be better at being a church that puts aside rules, hierarchies, status when we encounter someone in need?

I think that's something this church is very good at and at times it's something this church is exemplary at. So for example, do you remember when Matt found Tony sleeping outside in his car and we rooted around and we found him a caravan to stay in and we let the caravan park in the church car park even though it was against them all because there was a person who was hurting, who was cold and actually that's more important than rules sometimes.

Broadly, I think a religion of putting other people first starts with trying to see the image of God in all people. You know, even the ones that you don't agree with or that you find a bit difficult.

The ones that get your back up for no reason. The slightly scary person who comes up to you to tell you why you shouldn't wear masks on the bus. The person who corners you and makes you a bit uncomfortable in the party.

[ 10 : 41 ] All of these people are made in God's image. They aren't all behaving well and sometimes other people aren't always comfortable to be around but in holy spaces it's important to have difficult people because they rub off your corners and take off your edges and they help you to be a holier person yourself.

And sometimes I think we can rely a bit on really, really powerful images of God where God has got it all together.

So, you know, one of those songs which we sometimes sing and they do have a place because God is powerful and God is going to sort everything out and the band do sing them really well but, you know, the kind of songs where God is kind of an action hero and kind of fighting a war or leading an army or shielding us.

These are good, useful images of God, especially if you're scared. But if they're the only images that you have of God, that can be a bit toxic. I mean, there's such a small subsection of the images of God in the Bible.

We see God, the nurturing hen. We see God as Lady Wisdom seducing people to his banquet saying, come here, the food is fantastic. You know, there are lots of images of God in the Bible and some of them are fabulous.

[ 11 : 56 ] But I think that if we just rely on these particular images, then sometimes that can make us feel pressured to be more like Superman. I mean, if we think that God is like Superman, then what should we be like?

And actually, God is not Superman. God is not even Justin Trudeau or Bear Grylls, who's the new face of the Alpha Course, or Barack Obama, who are maybe morally upstanding intellectual supermen.

God is, God came to earth penniless. God meandered around as an itinerant rabbi. God refused to eat with the posh people. God, when they tried to put him on a horse and give him a sword, he said,

nope, I'm coming in on a donkey because peace is the message that I bring.

Our God is much bigger and more complex than male or female or butch or strong or weak or poor or rich. So why are the people we consider to be like God and the images we have for God so narrow?

How can we hold an image of God which helps us to see God in the people who aren't powerful, people who aren't on the streets, people dying slowly in hospital, people hiding because they're scared?

[13:12] God's image is in those people too. This is a fantastic statue by Andrew Gormley. It's actually Jesus. If you look closely, it's got the stigmata, so you can see the imprints of the nails on the body.

It's such a good statue that when it was first put into a park near a church, someone called the ambulance I think eight times because they always freaked out and thought it was a dead homeless person.

But our God came like this. And sometimes when you look at the people in the streets, it's not so easy to see God. Or I don't know if you've ever seen this cartoon.

It comes around on Christmas cards every now and again. I actually really hate it. So for those of you that can't see it, it's Joseph looking super surprised because he's given birth to a baby girl. And I think the whole punchline is that Jesus couldn't possibly be a girl. But we believe in this God who's like beyond all boundaries and all power. Is it that's the one thing God can't do is turn up as a woman?

[14:11] I don't think so. But he didn't. But is it ridiculous to say that he could? When you have this amazing God who's beyond genders and boxes, why wouldn't that God be powerful enough to be a girl if God wanted to?

I also think that cartoons like this can be really damaging to some of our young people. After all, what are we saying if we're saying it's really funny because the least Christ-like people in our community are little girls?

I think little girls are also made in the image of God. They are often Christ-like. Gosh, you only had to be at the funeral yesterday and see Theon speak to see that. And if we can't recognise that girlishness is also made in the image of God, then I think our view of God needs challenging.

I also think cartoons like this risk telling us that girlishness is ungodly, which is also untrue and unkind. And I guess tied to this is the question of how do we see God in ourselves?

Are we more likely to recognise God in the parts of us that are powerful? Yes, when I am in the streets defending all these people against all those other people, I'm most like God. But when I'm in my room feeling insecure, I'm not like God.

[15:21] I'm not made in God's image anymore. Am I only made in God's image when I've got it together? When even if the world's feeling apart, I put my lipstick on, put my hair up, and act like everything is together?

I think that these powerful images of God can sometimes lead to people overcompensating, pretending that you've got less faults, pretending to be more confident or busier than you are, pretending you're less reliant on, I don't know, what are the things that keep us together?

Sometimes alcohol, coffee, definitely coffee for me, running. But the real us is made in the image of God, not the perfect version of you that you can fake on Facebook.

The part of us that sometimes has a double chin, or messed up hair, or no invitations on a Saturday night. The part of us that's scared of losing our job, or not having a purpose, or not keeping it together in front of the kids, that part of us is also made in the image of God.

And I guess a huge part of being a people-first culture for me as a church is being a little bit more uncool. Because I think if you're uncool enough, then you let other people come here and be uncool.

[16:27] And I think sometimes that's one of the most sacred things in the world, is what people share with other people when they're not cool. When you're being cool, you're like, yeah, I've got all this.

And when you're uncool, you're like, yeah, I'm really into really nerdy stuff. Like, you know, that's the real person. So yes, I think that's the first thing I'd say. Less cool is when I would create a people-first culture.

The second thing, I think, is you have to be able to hear criticism. And I think that's something we're really working on as a church. You've been on an amazing journey. You've had so many ideas. And I think the first thing I was told when you came here is, we're really open. We hear different voices. We make up our own minds. You know, we're on a journey. We find it really interesting. And I think that disagreement is something that we are quite good at.

We hold together a huge range of views, a huge range of backgrounds. Whether you've come from a Catholic church or beacon, whether this is your first church, whether you've grown up in Burntwood or you've come further away, I think being able to disagree well is really important, even about the kind of things that can get really heated in church circles.

[ 17 : 34 ] So I've got a picture of communion because communion is a really niche thing that can get really heated in church circles, but I think most people on the streets aren't as concerned about. So I think that's a good place where Matt and I hold different views and we're able to disagree well.

So for Matt, communion is about remembrance, whereas for me it's a much more fundamental sacramental thing, a small bodily experience of the kingdom of heaven. But it means a lot to be able to disagree well and not just to think, well, one of us knows the Bible better than the other, so one of us is right, but actually to say, no, both these views are valid.

We're working it out. We aren't both right all the time. I think it's also really important that we can take criticism of our church well, even if it can feel a bit like an attack.

When I think about some of the abuse cases that have come to light recently, it seems really important that you can hear things, even if they're hard, because there are some amazing churches out there that just couldn't hear it when someone was saying this was happening in our church.

No one's perfect, and we're all an awesome, holy work in progress. Progress, and progress is only possible if we work on the things that would make this church even better if. And that is really, really hard, because I know when I hear someone say something really critical about our church home, my hackles come up and I say, how dare you think that?

[ 18 : 53 ] Or I try not to. I really step on that part of me. But if someone comes up to me and says, that's hurt me, you've got to kind of say, ouch, I can see that hurt you. And that can sometimes give them and me space to hear the criticism that there is.

And I guess, above all, to have a people-first culture, it's really important that everyone is invited to the table. We've all been to church events, or at least I have in previous churches, where only a few people are invited to things.

And I don't think that's on. Those events can sometimes be easier if you don't invite the difficult people, can't they? But whenever we see Jesus eating in the Bible, he isn't just surrounded by the nice people.

He makes sure everyone who could possibly want to come is there. And I think the message I have is that before COVID, this church was amazing at that. You'd have the New Year's Eve where the whole church would be filled with everyone from the community.

And some of your churchgoers say, I didn't even recognize everyone there. I think you had the curry club where everyone was invited to a social, even if they weren't always invited to dinner. And I think the drop-in still is that space.

[ 20 : 01 ] And we're still working on inviting young people and people with different backgrounds. But putting people in front of institutional and social hierarchies really depends on always working on not having insiders, outsiders.

And that's really hard work, because it never stops being work. Because you welcome the first batch of people, they become social insiders, they become your best mates, you've invited everyone. And then there are more people, and you haven't met them yet.

So it's just a constant work in progress. And it's hard work. But as a church, historically, you've been amazing at that. We're just starting to put our social events on again. We haven't really done any yet.

But I'm really excited to getting back to that, because you're all amazing people. And I think together we can produce something really beautiful. So that's what I've got to say about putting people first.

And I want you to hear it mostly as praise. Thank you.