

Keep On Growing: That's My King - 7th May 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

- [0 : 0 0] I just wanted to begin really by sharing a bit about my week, as there's been a few prayer requests that were sent out on the prayer chain. And I'm very grateful to all those who've been praying and messaging about that.
- So just briefly, if you're not aware, my dad had hip replacement surgery last Saturday. The hip stuff went okay, but he developed, or the surgery seemed to move, a blood clot on his spine, which meant by Monday night he'd lost all feeling in his legs.
- So this week on Tuesday, I rushed up to be with my mum. They live in Bridlington in Yorkshire to be with them. And over the next day or so, my dad ended up having two emergency operations on his back to try and save him from being paralysed, really.
- The first of which I think tried to shave his vertebrae to relieve some of the pressure on his spinal cord. But that didn't really work. And then the second one involved the surgeons going through his spinal cord microscopically to try and remove the blood clot which was lodged on the other side from his back.
- Amazing skills, these surgeons, I tell you. So it's been a bit of a tough week in many ways. He's alive, which is good, which wasn't a guarantee with such a risky operation.
- [1 : 1 8] And then with the potential paralysis sort of waist down, I think the implications of that for his dignity and whatever full-time care that might be required, their quality of life and so on. As you can imagine, we've had to consider all eventualities this week as a family.
- Thankfully, though, it seems the blood clot was removed successfully and he can actually move his feet a bit now, which is a positive sign. So there's hope. But he is looking at, I think, three months or so in hospital at a specialist unit near Wakefield for rehab and physio to see what can be done.
- And then we'll see after that for him and my mum. So I'm very grateful for your prayers and your messages, those who had known and Gemma perhaps had filled in some of my little friends as well, I know.
- Richard and Steve were able to step in and take a couple of funerals for me, which, again, I'm grateful for, including Paul's, Shirley's partner that we mentioned last Sunday as well. If you can continue to pray for my mum and my dad, one of us as a family would appreciate that.
- Don't quite know what the future looks like for my dad. And my mum getting over to Wakefield from Bridlington. We'll see how that all works out for her. But I might be up and down a bit in terms of visiting someone in the next few weeks, obviously.
- [2 : 2 9] But I'll do my best to keep you posted. But, yeah, just hold us in your prayers. We'd be very grateful. All right. Thank you. But grateful to God for all of his provision this week.
- So thanks to him. All right. So changing tack. But this morning, we're on this new series that we started last week called Keep On Growing.
- Looking at ways we might deepen and mature in our faith, both individually and collectively. I'm going to be a little bit shorter than usual with what I want to say this week.

Yeah, you might be thinking. Because I want to leave us enough time in the middle for some sung worship time as well. But thinking about this, the whole coronation yesterday, I don't know what you made of the whole service and the spectacle of it.

Hands up if you were watching it yesterday. Okay. Vast majority then. Vast majority. I appreciate, as I said at the top, there'll be mixed opinions about it.

[3 : 34] Or there'll be some flag-waving royalists among us. No doubt some radical republicans as well. Because the royal family, the idea of monarchy as a whole, it obviously splits opinions, especially in our day and age.

You might be pleased to know that I'm not going to major on the pros and cons of monarchy this morning. We can save that debate for pub club on Friday, maybe. Maybe not. We'll see.

We'll see. But the aspect of the coronation service itself, which I think spoke to me most, was just before the archbishop anointed Charles with oil and prayed for him behind these embroidered screens.

So if you watched it, which I know most of you did, you might recall this part where the king took off all of his outer robes and so on. And he knelt down in his shirt, looking for perhaps the only time in the day.

Pretty normal, really. Especially from the back. He just looks like a guy, you know, as if he's at a rail here. Looks pretty humble there. I assume that was the point from a sort of symbolic point of view, this undressed look.

[4 : 47] But I think from a faith perspective, for me, I was thinking, actually, yeah, that's how it should be. That's how it should be. That's the kind of leader. That's the kind of person I think God calls us to be.

Not bedecked with priceless jewels and finery. But instead, presenting ourselves before God in as lowly and as an unassuming way as possible.

And I say that because if we think about Jesus, think about outward appearance. We know next to nothing about what he looked like.

But there seems to be nothing in his outward appearance that caused him to be respected or honoured. You know, the paintings you get with a big sort of glowing ring around Jesus' head.

That wasn't there. You know what I mean? There was nothing to point him out, anything special from his outward appearance. Indeed, it's interesting that in one of the Old Testament passages that's often associated with Jesus as a kind of foretelling of who he would be.

[5 : 52] We read this, for example, in Isaiah 53. It says, He grew up like a tender shoot, it says there.

That's partly the reason for having this shoot on the slide for the series. You know, a growing shoot that points in some ways in this context to Jesus. But if we go back to that bit, it's that second sentence there.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. And that's quite something if you think about it. We'll think about the majesty in a bit.

But if that's true, if there was nothing, no beauty to attract us to Jesus, that's quite revealing. Because presumably God could have come to earth as Jesus and chosen to look pretty special, either in how he looked or in how he dressed.

I mean, if you or I were going to get incarnated at some time in history, I think I might have been tempted to order a six pack for a stomach, you know, eyes to get lost in, a smile that dazzled and hair that said, you're worth it.

[7 : 13] You know, that would be my wish list, but certainly the hair, I grant you. And yet if Isaiah is right, there was nothing about Jesus' appearance that drew people towards him.

Instead, Jesus comes to us in humility and in the ordinary. A king with no majesty. A king, if you like, stripped down to his shirt.

And the Archbishop Justin Welby said in his sermon yesterday in a coronation service, he said, Good words.

Now, admittedly, the strength of his point was perhaps somewhat undermined as he then stood before King Charles, who sat on a throne dressed in golden robes and then had a priceless bejeweled crown placed on his head.

But I guess in pointing to Jesus with his words, at least, you get the Archbishop's point. In fact, we could say it was precisely Jesus' lack of majesty.

[8 : 28] You know, his incredibly approachable ordinariness. That meant, actually, he was so captivating. In God's upside down kingdom, the ordinary is in fact extraordinary.

The natural is supernatural. Weakness is strength. Humility is greatness. Being last is actually first. And that, I would say, is good news for us.

See, not only does that make Jesus utterly approachable and relatable, and not only does that mean we can come to him exactly as we are, but it means we can be ourselves with each other too.

I mean, I don't care what you look like, how you come to church dressed and all that kind of stuff, and I hope that feeling is mutual. You know, yes, of course, we can make an effort if we wish, but I know for myself and possibly for you too, so often we do make an effort with our appearance because our base confidence level in ourselves is so low that we're just trying to function socially without feeling awkward or self-conscious, and that's okay.

That's okay. And I guess, therefore, the more compliments we can give and receive to each other to boost our low self-esteem, the better. But there's a difference between that normal stuff and trying to be something that we're not, you know, putting on a front or trying to compete with each other.

[10 : 05] There's no need, says Jesus. Who you are is more than enough. So being honest, being real, being open, that's at the heart, it seems, of what it means to grow in our relationship with God and with each other.

And if you struggle with that honesty and being real and being open and so on, all I can suggest is you try it. I've had to learn over the years to be more vulnerable, I think.

Gemma would probably testify to that. But it comes through practice. So perhaps over coffee, when someone says, how you're doing, you know, if life isn't great, say so.

You know, if they say, how are you? If you're tired and stressed or you're hungover and cranky, say so. Just be honest about it. Don't try and blag it. People can normally tell anyway.

But equally, if you're actually feeling pretty upbeat, then don't dampen that down just to fit in with those who might be feeling flat. Because your joy might just be the lift that someone else needs to know that life can be better than it is currently.

[11 : 17] That's one thought about yesterday's coronation and thinking about Jesus. Second one for today though. I think I'd suggest that in amongst all of the swords and the guns and the cannons, all the medals and the military uniforms on display with yesterday's pageantry, yes, it was obviously hugely impressive.

And as a country, as the commentators were saying, it's something that we do well. But the kind of king that we see in Jesus is one who champions a wholly different kind of power.

Now again, I don't want to get into a debate about war and the right of self-defense and so on today. But I think I've been struck this week in particular about what it means for us to follow Jesus as this humble, crucified king in terms of whatever spiritual battles we might be facing.

You see, I've had a few people, it's been interesting, ask of late why we as a church, and I in particular, don't seem to focus much on what we might call spiritual warfare or battling the powers of evil.

And that's a fair question, perhaps an arresting one I think for me, because I do think evil is real. I do believe in spiritual forces of darkness which can hold sway over people's lives.

[12 : 47] And I do believe the devil is some kind of personal angelic being who has turned against God, mainly because Jesus treats him as such.

And so over the years, for example, I've been involved in praying for deliverance of people in certain circumstances, done a number of house and businesses, blessings when something about a property, for some reason, doesn't feel right or peaceful.

In fact, ironically, I got asked to pray around the Redmoor pub a few years ago because the previous landlord called me in because the living quarters upstairs in the pub has a kind of hostile feel to one or two of those rooms.

And so I prayed around the place. And whatever I prayed, well, God seemed to do the trick. And we'll be glad to go there on Friday for a pub club. But in general, you know, if you're uneasy about somewhere at home or somewhere at work or anywhere, really, I'm very happy to come and pray.

And then we'll take it from there if they need to get more experienced people in the media diocese off of that as well. But I take that kind of thing seriously. Equally, though, I'm aware that all sorts of people can open themselves up to dark influences that will seek to work through them to disrupt God's good plans, as we were singing.

[14 : 10] You know, those forces can impact individuals whereby lies and abuse or corruption take hold. All that openness to dark influences can affect whole nations.

So I'd say someone like Putin is clearly influenced by and drawing on evil for his plans. And so given those circumstances, given that reality, I guess the question is, how might we stand against darkness and evil in ways which are in line with the kind of king and the kind of kingdom which Jesus represents?

Well, for me, I draw on two passages in the Bible, Ephesians 6 and Galatians 5. Now, what does that mean, those two passages? Well, here's what Ephesians 6 says.

As it paints a picture of the kind of armour available to us in order to resist evil, it says this. It says, Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

[15 : 30] In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.

So he mentions various places, there are various words. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God. All qualities and attributes that God gives us to overcome evil.

Qualities and attributes that can protect us as armour does from succumbing to any negative or harmful influences. But which also, because we're armoured up, give us maybe the confidence to help protect and stand alongside others who need help too.

And yet, given that with Jesus as this humble crucified king, we see in him anything but an aggressor.

Indeed, Jesus champions non-violent resistance. Why is there a sword in the armour of God? And I'd say the fact that it's called the sword of the spirit, that's why it's significant, I think.

[16 : 48] And here's where that second passage from Galatians 5 comes in. Because it's where we're told this. It says, The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And this is key, I think. Because it seems to me, therefore, that the best way to combat evil, the best way to deal with whatever spiritual darkness we might encounter, is to meet it not with aggression or violence, but to oppose it by pursuing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now these qualities, in my experience, are the best ways to demonstrate that another way is possible. That another kind of kingdom with a different kind of king is in place.

We face down darkness by ensuring God's shining light is brighter. Exposing evil for what it is. Challenging injustice.

And living a better way. And so for those of us, or for those who might say we, as a church, or perhaps I, don't talk about resisting evil enough.

[18 : 11] I'd say I'm actually talking about it all the time. All the time. It's just I'm more interested in championing the qualities by which evil can be resisted than I am about giving evil any more airtime or exposure than it already gets.

In the letter of James, we read this. It says, submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

How do we submit to God? How do we resist the devil? Well, I'd say above all, it's by living lives nourished by the Spirit and by the fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace. Love, joy, peace. All those things. And the reason really I've been thinking about this, particularly this week, is that when things go wrong in our lives, does that mean we're under spiritual attack?

Or are those things just bad luck or a consequence of a broken world? So this week, for my dad, for us as a family, are we, is he under spiritual attack?

[19 : 19] Or is it just rotten luck and the consequence of having a flawed body? Well, to be honest, I haven't got a clue. I haven't got a clue. But I haven't been.

And I don't tend to dwell on trying to work that out. Because for me, regardless of whether it is spiritual attack, regardless of whether it's bad luck or the consequence of living in a broken world, the response God calls and equips us with, I'd say is the same.

To live lives characterized by God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Yes, we can pray.

Of course we can. And in some mysterious way to do with spiritual realms that I don't understand. Prayer is vital. I felt that again this week.

But as for me and my house, as for us and our church, we will serve the Lord. And that service, well, it's in response to the ultimate king, Jesus himself, the one who came not to be served, but to serve.

[20 : 34] That's my king. I know for so many of us, Jesus is our king. We might say the gracious king who God has already sent victorious and happy and glorious.

The one who already reigns over us. So may God keep us growing in our faith and love for him both now and always.

Amen. Amen. Let's pray. And the band will come up as well. I know. So. So Lord, we do want to thank you for your sovereignty over us, for being our king.

We thank you, Lord, for being the kind of king you are, for being this humble king, willing to be crucified, but also come back to life to defeat the powers of death and darkness.

Thank you that in calling us to be your people, you offer us a way of life and a way of understanding that isn't based on outward appearance or military might, but is based on those qualities, those fruits of the spirit that you long to grow in our lives.

[21 : 59] Lord, there's lots of ways those fruit reveal themselves, lots of ways we know we need them to be growing in us. So I just want to pray for a few people this morning.

Do pray for Kathy and for Jay, Lord, in their new elected roles locally. Thank you for their willingness to serve. And the same prayer that we have for Charles and Camilla is for Kathy and for Jay, Lord, that they would lead and take on those roles with wisdom and with compassion, with your principles of goodness guiding all that they do.

Amen. Thank you, Lord, pray for all those elected this week, particularly for our local councils here, Burnwood Town Council, Litchfield District Council.

And again, the prayer is the same, that they would address the priorities of what you know matter most. Ways to build community, ways to build mutual love and care for each other.

Ways to prioritise the needs of those who would otherwise struggle. May the last and the lost and the least in our society be raised up by those in elected office, we pray.

[23 : 18] Do pray for our country, Lord. In light of coronation and all the events in the last few days. These are challenging times, it seems as always, that we're living in.

And there's differences of opinion, different ways forward that perhaps the elections have highlighted, the coronation brings out. There's a lack of unity, perhaps, in how we as a country feel we should go forward, which has been brewing for some time.

So we pray, Lord, that in that difference, you might help us to find a way which takes us forward in a direction that you know we would do well to follow.

Lord, we know that direction is your direction. How we put that into practice as a country, that's not always easy to work out. So guide our leaders, we pray.

Speak to them in ways they can understand. And challenge their assumptions. Give them wisdom and compassion for leading our nation in ways which reflect your principles, your priorities, we pray.

[24 : 36] Equally, Lord, back closer to home. Do pray for Don and Val's son, Andrew, with the biopsy for the tumour that's been detected in his prostate, Lord.

Pray for Don and Val that they may know your peace at this time as they wait. Be with Andrew as well. Bring him healing, we pray.

And we pray that tumour would be both minimal, that it would be benign, and if necessary, it would be operable in a way that leaves no lasting impact on his life, we pray.

Pray for Lucy and Pete, Lord, as they mourn the loss of Lucy's dad, Jim. Again, it's the same peace we're asking for, peace which is bespoke in a way.

So would you grant them your comfort, your rest, your reassurance at this time, we pray. And I pray too for my dad, that he'd recover well.

[25 : 45] And pray for strength and peace for my mum, as she cares and has concerns for him. Strengthen them both, I pray. And then, Lord, for each of us, in whatever situations, whatever else is going on in our lives, whether it's work-related, finance-related, relationships involved, health problems, whatever it is that, in amongst perhaps the good stuff that's going on, the sort of stones in our shoes perhaps, or the bigger things that weigh us down, help us now, Lord, in this time.

And we've got time this morning to be vulnerable with you, to offer you the wholeness of our lives, that your shalom, your peace, your wholeness might encapsulate all who we are and all that we're about.

May we make the most of the opportunity we've got in these next few minutes to be, as we said at the top, refreshed and recharged by you. And whether we go out for prayer, for the prayer ministry team, whether we pray with those next to us, whether we pray silently, but you know our words, whether we're singing your praises, may your spirit meet us on the road where we're at.

Would you hold our hand if that's what we need? And would you move us on further with you, Lord, keep us growing in the depth of our awareness of your love for us and our world, we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.