

Rooted in Grace

Just a couple of months ago I graduated from Clare College, a little College tucked away in the centre of Cambridge. Amidst all the celebrations that comes with finishing a degree was also sadness – graduating came with a bittersweet feeling, because from that moment, the life that I'd come to love over the past three years was about to change.

Part of that change meant moving out of my room in College. It was a room which I absolutely loved, overlooking Clare bridge and the river, with a window seat perfectly placed for watching the world go by. Just outside that window was the giant copper beech tree which stands over Clare bridge.

That tree has stood there for over a century, shading the College's bridge path and turning the light purple and orange under its leaves. Living right next to it, I saw that tree change through the seasons – from crisp, rust-coloured leaves in autumn, to cold and bare branches in winter, to gorgeous purply leaves unfurling in the spring. That tree is magnificent, and well worth the visit if you're ever in the centre of Cambridge.

Even more magnificent than the changes of the seasons on that tree, however, was the steadiness of its roots, dug deep into the ground by the Cam.

One of our readings today is from Jeremiah 17. It paints a beautiful picture of what it looks like to trust God: *the person who trusts God is like a tree planted by water which sends out its roots by the stream. It will not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.* Through changing seasons and challenges, through times of heat or drought, that tree remains steadfast and rooted. The person who trusts God becomes *rooted and established in his love*, to quote language that Paul uses in his letter to the Ephesians. No matter what, the one who trusts God finds steady ground on which to stand, even through the changing seasons; even as autumn turns to winter turns to spring; even as the undergraduate becomes a graduate; even as each of us lives our normal, everyday lives with all the challenges and joys it can bring.

In this Jeremiah passage, there is a call for you to become rooted and established in God's love, to find in your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – the security that comes from trusting God. God's asking you to get to know him, and he's promising that as you do, you'll find in him everything you need to thrive. As your roots go down in him, he'll strengthen you to bear fruit, to grow in your strengths and gifts, to love and serve those around you in freedom and joy.

The question that I want us to ask this morning is *how*. How do we trust God in every moment? How can we grow deep roots in his love? As I consider this question, I want you to keep that image of the tree in your mind. Let us each pray, as I speak, that God would be showing us how to become like that tree that trusts.

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One passage that begins to answer our question of *how* is our second reading, Matthew 11:25-30. These are Jesus' words – they are words offered to show us who God is, and to invite and help us to know him.

The first thing that they show us is that knowing and trusting God is a gift. In verses 25-26, we read a prayer that Jesus prays to his Father, to God. This is incredible in itself because it gives us a direct insight into what Jesus cares deeply about, an insight into what was on his heart and in his mind at that moment. And this is what he prayed:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

Jesus praises God, his *Father, Lord of heaven and earth*, because God was *pleased* to reveal *these things* – his plans and ways and heart – not to the *wise and learned* who thought they knew everything already, but to the *little children*. Jesus praises the Father because he chooses to give knowledge of himself to children – he chooses to give knowledge as a *gift*, rather than as something earned by those perceived to be 'good enough'. In God's eyes and grace we are all good enough. *The Message* paraphrases Jesus' prayer like this:

Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people.

I heartily join in with this prayer of praise: isn't it wonderful that we don't need to know everything in order to know God? I've just graduated from three years of studying Theology, and have come out with more questions than answers: I am so glad that it's not my level of Greek or the quality of my essays that enable and qualify me to know God. Knowing God is a gift, a gift that God is pleased to give to those living the most ordinary of lives. We don't have to do anything to earn it: into the midst of our everyday living and working, God places the gift – the grace – of knowing him. Into our jars of clay he places incredible treasure: knowledge of the *Lord of heaven and earth*. *The Lord of heaven and earth* – imagine that! The one who spoke stars into shining and breathed life into our bodies; the one who brings light and literal, living hope to the hurting places of our world; the one who loves.

Verse 27 goes on to show how this gift has been given. Jesus turns away from his prayer to speak gently to those around him, and this is what he says:

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The gift of knowing God can come only through Jesus, because it is only Jesus, the Son, who knows the Father. Jesus is the one through whom the gift is given: we can each know God, in our ordinary, everyday lives, because Jesus came to earth to be with us and to reveal the Father-heart of God to us. It is through Jesus that we are invited to know and trust God, as is beautifully expressed in verse 28, here in *The Message*:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay

anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Come to me, Jesus says, because I am the Son and I can reveal to you – give to you – knowledge of the Father. I can help you to know and trust him in your everyday, brilliant life – and the way that I will teach you to know him will give you rest. *Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it*, and I will give you more life, even when you feel weary and burdened. I will enable you to put down deeper roots in God's grace so that you may grow steadfast and strong, bearing fruit for God's glory and others' benefit. *Walk and work with me*, Jesus says, because by *keeping company with me you'll learn to live freely and lightly.*

Isn't that what we all would love? A life of living freely and lightly, at home in who we are and in the relationships we have, finding and bringing joy to whatever places that we find ourselves in? Jesus promises to grow this life in us as we walk and work with him.

So, the answer to our question of *how* to trust God is: come to Jesus. Accept his invitation, offered as a gift; spend time with him; get familiar with his voice. Put yourself in spaces and places where you're open to hearing Jesus' gentle, loving, challenging, and encouraging words; carve out spaces in your day where you can receive the gift of knowing God.

Build habits of prayer, devotion, and listening into your life that enable you to come to Jesus. These habits could be anything, and they can change and adapt as you need them to. Pete Greig, founder of 24-7 prayer, says this: *'I think that one of the keys for me is to try and see prayer as something embedded in normality and not removed from it.'* There's a lovely old Celtic prayer that says *'I make this bed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'*

I love that – the idea of 'embedding prayer in normality', praying even as you make the bed or cook up some food or go about other everyday tasks. Let's get really practical about how we can embed prayer in normality. I'll list some habits here that you could think about adopting, and I invite you to listen carefully and notice if any of these particularly appeal to you.

- The first is the breath prayer. A breath prayer is something you pray each time you breathe in and breathe out, a short, simple prayer such as 'Come Lord Jesus', or a name of God, like 'Good Shepherd'. Each time you breathe, bring this phrase to mind: breathe in, 'Come'; breathe out, 'Lord Jesus'. This kind of prayer becomes like a river flowing beneath everything you do, something as reflexive as breathing.
- A second habit is that of silence, spending some time in your day without any noise or distractions. Think about when in your day this could be best: are you a morning person or an evening person, or even a middle-of-the-day person? Put aside half an hour or even just ten minutes to switch your phone off, retreat to a quieter place and spend some time seeking and listening for God's voice in the silence. Simply ask him to show you what he's speaking over you and for you; ask him to show you his love. This kind of prayer can be a bit like watching for kingfishers, something I have often done from Clare College bridge. You wait and watch, sometimes for an hour or more, looking out for that flash of iridescent blue and fiery orange. In an instant it is

there, bright and brilliant, bringing joy to your heart and light to your eyes – like hearing God’s voice of love from out of the silence.

- A third habit is to read a little bit of the Bible each day. Again, think about when in your day this could be best: early in the morning is often my time for this, but for someone else it could be last thing at night, or over lunch. It could be alone or with friends or with children; find a Psalm to read and think about or discuss each day – ask yourself what it’s telling you about God. One Bible that I love for this kind of habit is *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, which I was introduced to on a children’s camp I help out at – it’s colourful and beautifully illustrated, retelling different stories from the start to the end of the Bible.
- A fourth habit is to think about doing something creative – something messy and different and fun. Again, this is a great habit to practise with friends and with children: put aside some time to read and think about a Bible passage and then make something in response to it. Write a song or a rap; paint or draw a picture; sculpt something out of clay or play-dough; make a collage out of old magazines. Maybe write a letter from God to you based on what you’ve heard from the passage. I have a friend who has a spare Bible just for painting in: she paints these absolutely stunning prayer-pictures over the text of the Bible itself, to help her to listen to what God is saying.
- A fifth and final habit is walking or running. When you walk or run, your feet mark out a regular rhythm that can help your thoughts settle and take you into a place of listening to God. As you go, notice what’s around you – the beauty of the created world; the people you pass; the thoughts that rise to the surface of your mind. Invite God to show you what he wants you to see. Give yourself some extra time for this kind of noticing and praying as you walk to work or church or school.

I’m sure many of you will be able to point to other ways and habits that have helped you to know God and hear his voice – maybe at the end of the service you could share these in conversation. How about committing to trying a new habit in your life this week, either alone or with some friends? Practise accepting Jesus’ invitation to come to him, to know God, and to become rooted and established in his love.

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We’ve spent some time thinking about *how* we can trust and know God: it’s through Jesus’ gift of being with us. We’ve thought about some habits we can adopt to make spaces in our lives to accept this gift, to be with Jesus, and to grow closer to God. Now, as you think about one habit that you could commit to, let’s return to the tree.

As you make space to be with Jesus, your roots – like the roots of Jeremiah’s tree and those of Clare’s copper beech – will grow stronger and deeper. Even if no-one else sees the effects of your prayer and new habits, you can be confident in this: that God is honouring your effort to know him and accept his invitation of grace. As you walk and work with him, he is helping you to grow and know him – and he is making you to be like that *tree planted by*

water that sends out its roots by the stream. He is forming you so that when heat comes – when you're confronted with change, stress, difficulty, or just everyday weariness – your leaves will always be green. He is strengthening and gifting you so that even in times of drought – even when you lack confidence, energy, resources, or time – you will bear good fruit.

These are the gifts he longs to give each of you, and so to finish, let us pray.