

Thoughts and Talks for Being God's People at Home: Eucharisteo

The latest in our video series on being God's people at home is now available:

Video Series: Being God's People At Home

God is leading us and calling us in this strange season. It's an opportunity to invest in a mode of being his people that draws us closer to him, stimulates our call, and increases our delight in the leadership of Jesus. This immediate time will shape us and serve us as we go into what is ahead.

Gill and I and others in our household have been putting together some thoughts and talks about how we might respond. In particular, how we might grow in the reality that we are currently expressing as "church in our homes" and while our homes are the location of God's church. In our homes, households, and "telehouseholds" we minister to one another, and draw closer to God.

Two videos have been uploaded, we'll be releasing more over the next little while from time to time.

Video 1: Introduction

Dying to Grow and The Point of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It's not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas "church gigs" have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together.

When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.**"*

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by "human concerns." Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their***

life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord's return: *"It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.**"*

How's that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not "lose our life;" we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of "human concerns" and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life. They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership

towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is “teleological” – from the Greek word *telos* meaning “end” or “point” or “goal.” We need to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he “sets his eyes upon the prize” (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a “Son of Man” who is “made a little lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This

is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don't do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light of Christ's supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore, evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It's not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can "lose ourselves" in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

Mercy in the Watches of the Night

Why haven't I come across this song before?
It's from 2006.



But what simple, eloquent, words of falling at the feet of the Father.

His characteristics personified. Majesty and grace, holiness and mercy. Tears.

*Am I unfit for You
Remember me, the one who turned from You
I come in rags tattered by the Fall
And all the earth, a witness to my crime*

*Mercy, weep over me
Let Your tears wash me clean
Majesty, be merciful with me
For my eyes have seen Holy*

*Hear my prayer at night
Let the morning find me alive
For I am tired and weakened by the Fall
Let all the earth bear witness to my cry*

*Let the Amen sound from Heaven as You lift my soul
Let the Amen sound from Heaven as You lift my soul
Let the Angels sound from Heaven, Holy is the Lord]*

Side-by-side in the Minefields

In the light of yesterday's post it seemed appropriate to repost this video:

Gill discovered this song on our 15th anniversary. We were 19 and 21 the year we got engaged...

We're hoping to see Andrew performing in the UK later this year.

Deep Joy

I'm currently reflecting on suffering as an essential, unavoidable part of what it means to live and follow Jesus.

This song by Page CXVI renders it one of the most profound ways that I've seen and heard.

Now, how to express it in dry, non-musical, words...

Remembering Jesus: Soul Survivor and Sacramental Singing



We've just been to Soul Survivor. For the uninitiated, it's a Christian youth festival, held as five separate weeks in various places around the UK. We went to the last week in Shepton Mallet, Somerset together

as a family with our church youth group and with 6,500 other people.

It was fantastic. Uplifting, moving, healing, restorative, life-giving, fun, peaceful, worshipful.

But I had an initial concern that it would be all about the hype and the froth. I had had a passing observation of Soul leader, Mike Pilavachi, and he has, shall we say, a *large* personality. Would the big top and the light show make it just another spiritualised buzz for young people, to dry up like the mud in the fields as the tents are pulled down and the cars drive away?

It wasn't like that. While rightly being the centre of attention at times, Mike, when it mattered, constantly put the attention back to Jesus. He was not afraid to turn off the light show and simply ask people to pray in quietness. People weren't asked to come forward to receive ministry from the big holy guru, but to simply to pray for and care for one another.

I saw people moved with contrition, with love, with peace, with joy.

And there *was* music. Lots of it. Some loud, some repetitive, some light, some profound. It carried people away without getting carried away, if you know what I mean. And while the lyrics were not 18th Century theological treatises, they were meaningful and biblical.

It reprised me with an ongoing thought I've had about charismatic worship of this kind, the sort that's done well. What does it *do*?

Firstly, it expresses an obedience to the Scriptural injunction to build one another up with "*songs, hymns, and spiritual songs*" and to "*sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.*"

Secondly, there is a sense of expectation that this form of worship is an *effective* means of encountering the grace of God in particular, life-giving ways. This is the charismatic sense in which the worship incorporates prayer, healing, restoration, and a growing intimacy with the Holy Spirit.

These are two marks that characterise sacraments. The two canonical Sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are done in obedience and are an effective administration of God's grace. We encounter God in the Sacraments, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

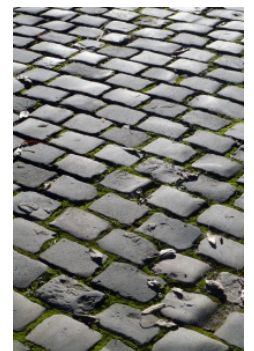
Musical worship is *not* a Sacrament, but in this sense it is *sacramental*. In the midst of musical worship we can encounter the grace of God in a particular way as the Holy Spirit ministers to us.

What struck me at Soul Survivor however, was another aspect of this. The two Sacraments also have the characteristic of being a *memorial*, in the broad sense of the word of "an aid to memory." Jesus commands that the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine and the sharing together should be done "*in remembrance of me.*"

As I watched over six thousand young people singing about Jesus it was clear, by this they were *remembering* him, and they were remembering who they are *in* him. It was truly a memorial. It was kerygmatic. It was a connection with and a proclamation of the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And my prayer is this: that as the young people dispersed into their year, that they would take the remembering of these songs, this worship experience, with them. In whatever stresses and strains they experience, that they would be led to *remember Christ* there, away from the big top, in the midst of reality. That they would do life *in remembrance of him*, and so bear much fruit for his glory. Amen.

Sustenance for the Plodding Pedestrian



*When You don't move the mountains I'm needing You to move
When You don't part the waters I wish I could walk through
When You don't give the answers as I cry out to You
I will trust, I will trust, I will trust in You!*

*Truth is, You know what tomorrow brings
There's not a day ahead You have not seen
So, in all things be my life and breath*

I want what You want Lord and nothing less

Something anthemic

Rend Collective have released their new album, *As Family We Go*. Here's the introductory video.

It's rare that I come across something that is so anthemic to the way Gill and I seek to lead life.

We as a church were never meant to be a timid club huddled together for safety, but a pilgrim family progress, chasing after the wild lion heart of God...

We weren't created to journey through life alone, but we're called "the family of God" for a reason...

We've got to break out of the cages of safety and fear into the wide open spaces of the unknown trusting that nothing is impossible with God...

We were never intended to go this road alone, we were given to each other as family, and as family we go.

Missional Eschatology Before Breakfast

There are these words:



*Fearless warriors in a picket fence,
reckless abandon wrapped in common sense
Deep water faith in the shallow end
and we are caught in the middle
With eyes wide open to the differences,
the God we want and the God who is
But will we trade our dreams for His
or are we caught in the middle?*

*Somewhere between my heart and my hands,
Somewhere between my faith and my plans,
Somewhere between the safety of the boat and the crashing
waves...*

That things are both “now and not yet” is a fundamental part of Christian spirituality.

It locates us in history: The Kingdom of God is **now**, for Christ is Risen! The Kingdom of God is **not yet**, for we look ahead to when Christ brings renewal and rightness to the groaning of all creation. We are “in the middle” in the opportunity to share in God’s loving purposes, his *mission*. We are not too early nor too late to the dynamic plans of God. This is what *eschatology* and talk about the end of all things means for the Christian.

It locates us in ourselves: “**Now** we are children of God,

but what we will be has **not yet** been made known.” (1 John 3:2). In the middle, we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Phil 2:12-13). We know now, whose we are, for certain. But we are incomplete, and we must have growth, refinement, maturation, strengthening.

“Now and not yet” therefore both *grounds us* and *stretches us*.

- We delight in what we have, but holy discontent with ourselves and the world spurs us on.
- We rejoice in where we have come to, but plans and ambitions must be abandoned as shallow and small as God’s perspective invades.
- We have the peace of present rest, but the constant call makes us face our fears and turn away from the control and comfort that would placate them: “Your journey is not yet done, continue, walk this way with me.”

The opposite of “now and not yet” is terrible. It’s “this is all there ever was, and it’s all there ever will be.” In such things we are both rootless and directionless, simply adrift. Rather, lead me through the tensions and pains of the now and not yet, so that, being alive, I may live!

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