Sunday 3rd October – **God of the everyday (Romans 12:1-6)**

I want to read you ‘the message’ paraphrase of today’s reading.

**12 1-2**So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

**3**I’m speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

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Now, we have been talking about how God is interested in every part of our lives – from birth to growing up to church stuff like baptism and church membership, to dating. Today I was supposed to be talking to you about work. Because that’s another part of our lives that God wants to be involved in, that’s an important part of who we are and what we do as we seek to serve him wherever he has called us; it is a place that matters to God.

So I had this sermon planned about working, valuing what we do, seeking God’s will, working ‘as if working for the Lord’, as Paul says. And it was ok, and I’m sure you might have found it interesting.

But in the words of Chris Tarrant, “I don’t want to give you that.”

Because this week I have been on a residential week with my college. It’s funny how God works, isn’t it. I had hoped not to preach this week, because of being away and not having preparation time, but circumstances dictated that I had to step in, and that’s fine. But not only did I end up agreeing to preach on a week I wasn’t meant to be preaching, I ended up with preaching about work, and I chose the reading we have just heard on that basis. So the scene is set, when I come back all fired up from a fascinating week, to be able to come and hopefully inspire you with some of what I have been doing!

Our week has been all about pioneering and mission. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of pioneers in Baptist terms – they are like missionaries to the UK, they look for new ways of doing church and being church in the community to reach out to people who would never step through the doors of the actual church. Those of you who have been coming to Bible Studies will know that church is completely alien to the culture around us, that these days only 4% of children go to Sunday School and only about 10% of adults go to church regularly so we really are reaching out to people who have no idea what church is.

One thing that the teacher started telling us about was a thing she was asked to do back at the beginning of her training, and just the suggestion produced some interesting thoughts. Her class was asked to go into a betting shop (individually) and place a bet.

How would you feel if I asked you to do that? Perhaps some of you have done it before. But for many of us, I suspect, there would be some degree of nerves. I don’t know what to do. What is the procedure? Is it going to be obvious that this is my first time? Will they be laughing at me? Will someone be able to help me and tell me what to do?

That scenario would be similar to the scenario many people face in going to church. And I just found that incredibly interesting to put myself in that place.

But that’s not really what I want to talk about today.

What I want to tell you about today is a visit we made to one of these ‘Pioneers’. Because it really made me think – not just about church, but about the Christian life.

So, Pioneers don’t try to work in the normal church structure. They don’t say that what we do on a Sunday is wrong, and please don’t think I’m about to cancel church and replace it with some wild and wacky new idea! But they do realise that what we do on a Sunday isn’t really reaching the people out in the community. So their job is to go out into the community and just ‘be’ with the people, watch out for what God is doing, see what grows up naturally. And that may end in something that looks a bit like church, or some sort of gathering that looks quite different to church but still includes the essential ingredients of church like worship, discipleship, mission, fellowship.

The lady we went to see was called Joy. And her job title was ‘Community Listener’. She had been sent by a large Baptist Church, along with a couple of mission organisations, to an area in which the Baptist Church was about to close down because they only had 5 members. Her role was **not** to revive the church. Her role was to say, ‘How can we maintain a Christian presence and outreach, showing God’s love to this community who are clearly not interested or involved in church?’

It comes with a lot of prayer. Listening to God. But also, as her job title suggests, listening to the community. So she spent her time walking around the community, meeting people. Using the local facilities. Joining slimming world, the WI. Mentoring at the local school, becoming a school governor. She took us in to meet with the head teacher and the head, who was not a Christian, was very clear that ‘Joy cares for us because Jesus cares for us and Joy wants to follow Jesus’.

In doing these things, she saw the needs of the community. She started a food bank. She has been able to pray with people. She has conversations about God, and faith. She has other plans, but I don’t want to go too much into what she is doing because I think that gets us into the ‘we should do x,y,z’ mentality. But above all, what she does is to live out the Christian life and values in her community. She showed love; she showed integrity; she shared her faith.

Now, I’m not suggesting that her work was not important and distinctive. Pioneers work hard at building connections with councils, charities, local organisations and businesses; organising events and support networks. And that is something that most of us don’t have the time or knowledge to do, and that is fine because we are all called to different things. But because of her position she was living out her faith in a way that called out to other people. She was listening to the needs of the community around her. She was building relationships with the people she met – and not just nodding acquaintance but real caring, loving relationships in which they knew they were valued not just by Joy but by God.

So we came back from our visit, and we reflected on it. We reflected on all the good work that Joy was doing in that village, the relationships she was building and the love she was showing and the message she was sending – and the way she was listening, and the direction that could give to a church wanting to work in that community. And as we reflected back on our visit, one thing that we felt was, ‘surely she is just doing what Christians ought to do?’

I might be the minister of this church, but much as I would love to I don’t have time to go out and spend my days in the community – and I very much doubt you would appreciate it if I said that part of my work was joining slimming world! When you add up all the things Joy does, it really is a full time job.

But what if, rather than one person going to the community centre, the café, the food bank, the slimming world group, all the schools, the over 50’s groups, the golf club – what if the church did it? What if someone went into James Hornsby – not to spread the gospel but just to live as a Christian? Oh, we don’t need that – Debbie is there already. What if someone went to the horticultural society, and showed by the way they treat people and the way they speak to people that God loves them? Oh wait, Fred does that. What if someone joined the over 50s and just listened, to see what concerns the people there have that the church might get involved in? Ah… we have people there…

You see, this is where we can live for God in our everyday lives. We might not all be called to be Pioneers in the sense of making new paths for the church, creating new things, starting activities. But all those things start with what Joy was doing – listening, and living, in the community. Being an authentic, spirit-filled Christian in every part of her life; loving and caring for the people she met. In the workplace; in the social groups; in the family.

So my suggestion to you today is that you all become ‘community listeners’. And yes, that the church is open to new things. But these people spend **years** sometimes even before they start anything, just being and living and listening in the community – and listening to God. What is it that God wants to do here in Laindon and Langdon Hills? What is it that this community is calling out for? What can we show them in our lives and our witness?

So as ‘listeners’ I want to share with you the underlying principles of Pioneering:

Bless Unconditionally –

Our mission statement suggests that we want to share God’s love with those around us. Now that is not just telling them the gospel, it is **being** the gospel – **being** ‘good news’. We want people to say of us, ‘it is good that they are here’; as individuals and as a church. As you go out into the community, or into your workplace, and listen, what is it you personally can do to bless the people you meet? What can the church do to bless them?

And bless with ‘no strings attached’. Not, ‘if you come to church’ or ‘if you listen to the gospel’ but just because ‘I love you’. Joy said to us, ‘we don’t love people because we want them to become Christians’ – ie. we don’t see everyone as a potential convert and our loving or blessing as a way to get them to Jesus – ‘but we want them to become Christians because we love them.’ The love comes first, and people need to see that. I love my neighbour, I want what is best for them; and that means meeting them where they are, meeting their needs because they are in need, not because we want to win them to the gospel.

Jesus healed people; whether or not they followed him, whether or not they were thankful. He had compassion on the people who were hungry **after** they had heard him, when there was nowhere to go but home and he didn’t need them to stay, but he fed them because he wanted them to get home safely. He invited himself to eat with Zaccheus **before** Zaccheus offered to repay those he had cheated, and never told him to do so. He just loved and blessed the people – no strings attached. So, bless unconditionally.

Live incarnationally –

Incarnation is the word we use when we talk about God becoming human in Jesus. And for us, and for churches, it means being a **part** of the community. If God could only reach the world by coming into it, how can we presume to connect with others as an outsider looking in? If your community is your workplace, don’t sit off in the corner at lunch time with your Bible, sit with the group and chat. If your community is a social group, get involved. In our reading this morning we read, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” or “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking” – but that doesn’t mean we cut ourselves off from it. Just because those around you swear, doesn’t mean you have to, but it also doesn’t mean you can’t associate with them. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and ‘sinners’ – he went where the people were who needed him, he became one of them, although he was different. And so he reached out to them, and spoke to them.

Make friends –

Build relationships. But relationships of **friendship**. When we put on church ‘outreach’ activities, that is not friendship. There’s an imbalance, between the person who runs the activity and the person who comes to it. When we invite people to things, there is an imbalance between host and guest. However nice the host is, however fantastic the event, a guest is a guest, someone who does not belong.

A lot of teaching about outreach these days stresses this. The guest is at the mercy of the host – they have no say in what is said and done, they have to try to fit in. Does a good host provide for their guest’s needs, or make them feel at home?... It’s an interesting question. But meet in the canteen, the café, over the fence with the neighbour – that is an equal relationship, and that is where friendship is built. A friendship is much less formal, and can be much deeper and more genuine and caring.

Listen –

Listen to God, and listen to the community. What are the people around you saying they need? What is God telling you to do for them? Where is God directing you, as an individual, and us, as a church, to go? When I get a request from a care home out of the blue asking for us to help them, is that a move of God? Is that God opening a door? When the people around us ask repeatedly when Noah’s Ark is going to reopen, is that God’s prompting?

Community listening. We can’t listen if we never speak to anyone. We can’t listen if we are not involved in the workplace, the school, the clubs. But we **are**. We are put in these places – do we ever listen to them? And if we do listen, what do we do about what we hear?

I hear my friend say she needs a drink – I get her a drink. I hear my friend say he gets lonely – perhaps I go and visit; perhaps I introduce him to another friend or start a coffee meetup. I hear my friend say he is worried about something – perhaps I pray with him. And maybe, one day, I will hear my friend say she wants to know more about God. And she will say that because she knows that I will listen. She knows that I won’t jump on her and drag her to church, but she knows she can talk to me. Because I have been loving her, I have been living and working alongside her, I have been a good friend to her, and I have been listening.

And perhaps, as we listen, we begin to think, ‘maybe this is something the **church** needs to know.’ It might seem completely outrageous. ‘I wonder if Helen realises that there is nowhere for people to go to play cards.’ That might be something we want to get involved in, or it might not, but the point is that without someone on the ground living and working and **being** in your school or club or workplace, without someone listening and saying what they hear, we will never even think about it.

But… It also involves these things:

Laying down our agenda –

People and churches who do any kind of pioneer work will tell you that you can’t do it with an aim or target or plan in mind. As I said before, we can’t think to ourselves, ‘I must go into this place and make friends so I can bring them to church’ or ‘so I can set up a group that looks like this’ or ‘Who here am I going to introduce to Jesus?’ If a teacher at Debbie’s school says, “I’m really lonely, I need somewhere to go to meet people and have a chat, but I’m not interested in church,” there’s not much point in Debbie responding with “Come to church” – or with “Come to tea and chat.” That’s not listening. That’s like the people at Clarks who measured the girls’ feet and said “That comes out at 81/2 G, but we haven’t got any of those so I’ll bring you a 9 instead.” All they achieved was to make me realise they were not interested in what actually fit, but in making a sale.

Laying down our lives –

Jesus literally laid down his life for the people he loved; and others have done since. I very much doubt that care for people at the preschool, or the over 50s, is going to literally cost anyone their life. But when the Bible calls us to be ‘living sacrifices’ it means to put aside our wants, our preferences, even our ‘needs’ at times, for the sake of those we want to care for in Jesus’ name. We aren’t just to be Christians when it suits us, but to live out the love of God **all** the time.

Sometimes that will be hard. Jesus warned his followers that they would face difficulty and persecution for living for him. And that is one of the reasons we have church – to love and care for and encourage one another in our Christian walk.

Which brings me to the last point:

Keep going.

Relationships take time. Listening takes time. Building anything worthwhile takes time. These people, who go out into the community and do all this stuff, spend the first year just listening. Just **being**. Just proving to the community around them that they are there, that they care, that they aren’t about to walk away. That a relationship is worth investing in, because they are in it for the long haul. And that takes patience, not to immediately run off and start trying to do things. Not to look for results. These people are seeing results 5, 10, 15 years down the line, not next week. But people outside the church are coming to faith, are growing in their spiritual journey, are creating communities that might look a bit like church but might look different, where they would never come into a church otherwise.

So my challenge to you today is this: when you go out of here today, and into the world this week and next, go intentionally as a ‘community listener’. Pray, ask God to show you where he is working. Bless people, build relationships. Listen. If you run into trouble, come to us for support. And if you hear from God, or from people, something that might just be a ‘God thing’, come back and tell us. Let us discern together what God is doing in this place – because he sure is doing something!

Let us pray.

Lord God, thank you for the places you have made for us, the places you have put us in outside this building. Would you open our eyes to see you at work. Would you open our ears to hear the voices of this community calling out for you. Show us how we can bless, how we can live as your disciples, how we can work for you and share your love in these places. Draw us closer to you as we live our lives for your glory, and draw to you those to whom you have sent us.

In the words of St Ignatius: Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your will. And teach us to see in your service no hard task, but the true glory of a great adventure. Amen.

Our final hymn reminds us of God’s care in every part of our lives:

Lord of all hopefulness

May God bless you and keep you, may he make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, may he turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen.