

## **Growing Faith – Children and Young People (Psalm 78)**

*This is the last in our series on what God is calling us to be as Post-Pandemic church. We consider the vision of passing on the heritage of faith from generation to generation as expressed in Psalm 78:1-8 and how we can be more effective at that as a church coming out of the Pandemic.*

### **Do you ever think about the future?**

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We often think about the future in terms of great advances we might hope for. I was talking to my dad who was excited about Elon Musk's plans to have a colony on Mars. Other people may look forward to a day when science has advanced enough to be able to cure cancer or other horrible diseases.

Or we might be worried about the future. What is going to be the impact of the climate crisis? What flashpoints might there be between the superpowers that could lead to war? What about a more serious pandemic? Or could robots take over the world?

One of the most iconic science fiction films is the film Terminator. It is based in the present, but a robot (played by Arnold Schwarzeneger) is sent back from a future in which robots have taken over the world. The robot or Terminator has been sent back to do one simple job - to kill a young woman called Sarah Connor. Why? Because this woman is going to become a mother and the child she is going to give birth to and bring up is going to be a big threat to the power of the robots in the future.

Ridiculous as the plot of the film is, at its heart is a powerful truth - mothers can profoundly shape the future!!

If you read all of Psalm 78 (at 72 verses it is the second longest Psalm in the Bible), you will discover that it is all about Israel's history. Yet in these first 8 verses it gives a profound vision for shaping the future and it is linked to this idea that mothers profoundly shape the future.

So let's look more closely at verse 1-6:

### **The Biblical Vision - vs. 1-6**

#### **The Domino Effect**

The vision is in essence a kind of domino effect down the generations. You know the idea of lining up a row of dominoes, so that when you push the first one it knocks the next one over, which in turn knocks the next one over and so on.

Well in verse 5, it says God has set up Israel as a nation of generations into the future. God set things going by performing amazing deeds of power when he rescued Israel from Egypt and then giving them the law, which he told them to teach the next generation along with the stories about what God had done.

That gets the domino of generations falling in to being the people of God as verse 6 says...

"... so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children." (Psalm 78:6)

In that way the great truth of God's powerful works to save and his Law are to be passed from generation to generation and so profoundly transform the future.

On our new Life Stories web page, Sue Hawkes has recorded a short video about her journey with God. She actually lives and goes to church in Spain, but who joins us at St. Luke's when she is in this country and Chris her twin sister and her mum Pam are members of St. Luke's. In the video she starts by saying, "Like many people my journey [with God] doesn't start with me, but my mother." What was key to her being a Christian? Her mother Pam being a Christian. But the story goes back further than that! What was key to her mother Pam being a Christian? It was the influence of her uncle who lived in Scotland and who she and her mum went to live with in World War II.

The faith was passed down from one generation to the next and then to the next generation. This is part of the Biblical vision of how we with God's help transform the future.

### **Why it matters**

So, why does it matter that we continue this domino effect of passing on the history of God's saving acts and his teaching about how to live for him?

#### **A Precious Heritage - vs. 1-4**

Firstly, it is a precious heritage. In the first few verses of the Psalm the writer speaks with excitement about how wonderful and special are the truths he is going to share.

In one sense they are 'hidden things', in other words these truths are not obvious to people, even though they have been around for long time. This points to the immense privilege there is in being told the truths of being let in on the secret of the wonders of life with God.

In another sense they are parables. Not in the sense here of made up stories, but of historic stories that have a lesson for all generations.

Just as you would want to pass on a precious heirloom to your children rather than have it thrown in the bin, so the Psalmist is enthusiastic about passing on this heritage to the next generation.

#### **Loyalty to Past Generations - vs. 4**

There is also a sense in which doing so shows loyalty to previous generations. In verse 4 speaking of his ancestors, the writer says he will not hide these truths from 'their' i.e. his ancestor's children.

In a sense our children do not just belong to us, they belong to all the generations that come before us. People down the ages have made big sacrifices to ensure the Christian message is passed on from one generation to the next. If we are not trying to do the same, then are we not in a way being disloyal to past generations?

#### **Blessing for Future Generations - vs. 7-8**

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, it matters for the sake of future generations. Not just our children, but for their children and their children!

In verses 7-8, the Psalmist tells us why it is good for future generations. They will put their trust in God and follow his commandments and not make forget God and make the same mistakes of the past.

In fact the rest of the Psalm shows us how the history of Israel is a lesson in both the absurdity and the disasters that arise from forgetting God's acts of salvation and laws. The introduction to the two main sections of historic teaching begin:

"They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them." (Psalm 78:11)

"They did not remember his power--the day he redeemed them from the oppressor," (Psalm 78:42)

As Christians we know that to be a Christian is to trust in his great acts of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to respond with a life joyfully living in his ways. We know that this is the best way to live, because it releases us from guilt, helps us to live truly good lives having God with us every step through good and bad times and leads ultimately to eternal life.

Surely we want that for our children? And their children? And their children? That can only happen if we enthusiastically seek to pass it on to the next generation.

That's the Biblical Vision for shaping the future.

But how are we doing with carrying out that vision? The simple answer is: not well at all. In fact arguably this is the biggest problem facing the church in this country.

So let's look at the present crisis, before considering what we might do about it.

### **The Present Crisis:**

Before I talk about the present crisis, we need to acknowledge that for many this is quite personal. I know there are many at St. Luke's as there are in most churches in the UK who are very sad that some or all of their children have wandered away from the Christian faith.

We need to acknowledge that no matter how well we do at raising our children as Christians it is still ultimately their choice as to whether they continue in that faith into adulthood. We also need to acknowledge that there are some very strong forces in our society that pull people away from Christian faith. Also, even where children have grown up to have their own strong faith it is sometimes despite our failings as parents!

We should also never give up hope. God can and often does bring people back to faith later in life. So let's never give up with our children.

But, despite these sadness we cannot give up on this important task and as a church we need to consider how we can better carry out the vision so wonderfully expressed in Psalm 78.

### **What's the problem?**

So how serious is the problem? It is serious. Some quick facts:

In the last 100 years or so, the church has exhibited a generational half-life. That is in each generation there is roughly half the number of Christians as there was in the previous generation.

That means we are only being 50% effective at passing on the faith. And it is at the stage when children are young people that there is the biggest problem. Of those who say they used to believe, but do not believe anymore, 55% said they left the faith between 11-25 years old.

And potentially things are getting worse. In Church of England generally there has been a 2% decline in attendance of adults each year. When it comes to children however, it is a 4% decline annual decline.

If we are unable to turn this around, the church will simply die of old age!

### **What shall we do about it?**

So, what shall we do about it?

#### **Prioritise Young People:**

First of all we need to see this as a priority for our church.

When you ask people at what age they came to faith over 75% say it was before they were 18.

Age of coming to faith:

Under 5 years - 40%

5-10 years - 16%

11-18 years - 20%

18+ only 24%

It is harder to bring someone to faith later in life and it is better for you if you come to faith younger - it helps stop you making poor life decisions that can be hard to recover from! Also the younger someone becomes a Christian the more years they can give to serving God and help others come to faith.

I am deeply grateful that I became a Christian at 9 years old and not 49 years old!

St. Luke's has done well in previous years at keeping children and young people as a priority and we have kept a children's section in our online services (although I sometimes wonder if the adults prefer the children's slot more than the children!) and the online connection with church has perhaps been harder to engage with for the children and more so for the teenagers in our congregation.

So that is why I want one of our three reimagine and reignite teams to be focussed on children and young people. My prayer is that as a church we can come out of this lockdown more committed and more able to help our young children grow in their faith.

#### **Equip and Encourage Parents and Grandparents:**

So firstly as a church we need to prioritise children and young people, but secondly, we need to equip and encourage parents and grandparents to better pass on the Christian message to their children. I think this is definitely an area that we can improve on as a church and it is essential.

In the Bible it is clear that it is the primary responsibility of parents to pass on their faith to their children. It says in Deuteronomy 6:

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deuteronomy 6:7)

And it is clear that family have the biggest influence on helping people come to faith. When asked what had most influenced them in their faith the top three responses were:

- Family 73%

- Friends 36%
- Teachers 36%

And although talking about faith at home with your family might feel daunting, it will not only help them in their faith and you in yours, but it will also draw you together as a family.

One 16 year old boy said in a survey:

"because you're with your family the whole time, you get on other people's nerves. Which make talking about faith kind of harder. But when you do, I feel like it brings you closer to your family."

So, we need to equip and encourage parents and grandparents to play a key role in passing on the faith to their children and grandchildren.

### **Actively Involve young people in church life**

Thirdly we need to actively involve young people in church life. We've talked a lot about the future, but they are very much part of the church today as well.

Another survey concluded that the following three things were crucial in helping a young person grow into an adult faith:

- Influence of parents
- Active participation in worship
- Connection to other adults in the faith community

My own experience of growing up as part of a church was that I was encouraged to play a full part in church life and had good relationship and connection with other adults in the faith community. I'm also grateful for the opportunities and encouragements my children have experienced when they've been involved at St. Luke's and the friendship shown to them by other adults in the church.

Let's work at engaging and involving all our young people more and more in the life of the church at every level and let's treat them as important and valued members of our congregation who have lots of gifts to offer to the rest of us.

### **A Church of Past and Future**

in Zechariah, there is a wonderful vision of the future of Jerusalem:

*"This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." (Zechariah 8:4-5)*

It is a vision where young and old are together as part of the same community. Where the older members can remind us of God's great blessings from the past and the younger members are a sign of God's blessings to come in the future!

Let's pray and work for a church where the good news of Christ passes from one generation to another and God's blessing for future generations is secured!