

SERMON 2

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BEING FORMED - Part 1

Reading: Daniel 3:1-18.

I hope you've been able to have a look at the study notes, 'This is my song'. They were setting the scene for today's teaching. I really enjoyed doing some reminiscing about songs as I wrote them. The first one I remember is a Vera Lynn's classic:

There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow, just you wait and see.
There'll be love and laughter and peace ever after,
Tomorrow, when the world is free.

So, how many points out of ten for truthfulness? One out of ten?! The cliffs at Dover *are* white... but as for the rest... Hopelessly optimistic! Not surprisingly, in those days everyone was wanting to look forward to a better future.

Much later on, as a teenager in the Swinging Sixties, I was hearing songs like, 'All you need is love' and 'Yellow Submarine'. At the same time, though, I was chanting psalms in the church choir. I didn't necessarily understand what I was singing – the 1662 prayer book was all there was in those days – but the psalms were stored away in my mind, and I'm very grateful for that. Of course, as teenagers, we enjoyed taking the mickey. So when the annual parish concert came around, the youth group wore choir robes and solemnly chanted the Highway Code:

[Singing]

'The Highway Code: Part One: the road user and animals:
Go slowly when driving past animals and give them plenty of room,
Stop if necessary or if signaled to do so.'

Now, you may laugh, but how many of *you* can recite part of the Highway Code from ten years ago, let alone forty? And that's one of the points behind all this reminiscing about songs – because what someone *says* to us we may or may not remember; but what they *sing* to us we're more likely to remember, especially if *we* start singing it as well. So, be careful what you sing along to!

Turning to today's reading... we heard how Daniel's friends faced their fiery ordeal. You'll have to read on if you don't know the ending! Later, Daniel himself was thrown to the lions – and showed the same determination to honour God regardless of the consequences. Skipping forward hundreds of years, to Mary the mother of Jesus, who

was mentioned in the study notes: Mary honoured God in completely different but no less challenging circumstances.

So what had formed the characters of these brave men, and of Mary the mother of Jesus? The Lord God was so central to their whole way of life, that the songs and stories we find in their scriptures – which we call our Old Testament – will have been very influential in shaping them. God's people didn't always obey him, but they certainly didn't waste time arguing about whether or not he existed; their scriptures which recorded their national history were so full of examples of God in powerful action that there really wasn't an argument to be had there.

Today's world is different, though, isn't it! One problem is the 'hurry sickness' which the speaker mentioned at our Parish Weekend. Hurry sickness leads to wanting quick and easy answers. "Time and effort over a long period? – that's much too slow! If I hit a rocky patch? – well, I'll manage; I'll have to! And I'll give God some thought one day, but not at the moment; I have a lot on, you know."

Unfortunately, there are many challenges in life which can only be handled by people of *character*. That's what we see in the stories from Daniel: genuine one hundred per cent diamond character. And just as physical diamonds have to be formed in rock by relentless pressure over time, so the sort of character which God can use to do great things, to endure great things, to bear fruit for his kingdom, isn't developed overnight.

There is no 'quick way' to make a diamond! And there's no 'quick and easy' approach to growing character either. It takes years not minutes and, as our Parish Weekend speaker was telling us, many people find that they grow most noticeably during times of pain. God is looking for us to work with him over the long haul, so that he can turn us into gems! Do you like the idea of being a gem for Jesus? Well, get ready for the Lord to use the pain and the pressure as well as the good times. And prepare for a course of training that will last for the rest of your life.

Over the years we've had in our parish many people whose trust in God has been sorely tested, and right now this seems particularly true. Some have had to withstand the battering of major family crises. Others have coped with a diagnosis of cancer followed by very unpleasant treatment over weeks and months, *without knowing whether or not the outcome would be good*. Yet, despite not knowing, they've been able to say, 'We trust you, Lord. Even if this treatment isn't successful, we still trust you, Lord.'

Now, I'm not wanting to paint an unreal picture – the people I'm thinking of would be the first to admit that they've had wobbly times, and that it hasn't been easy. But I think we can recognise in them the sort of character growth which comes through pain – diamond character that comes from rock; *the Rock* – the God in whom we trust. And of course the glory goes to him.

The study notes and the teaching in this sermon and the next relate to the subject of

spiritual formation. Our spiritual formation doesn't just start when we become Christians; we're being formed and shaped from Day One. Don't get put off by the name – 'spiritual formation' is basically to do with 'how we end up being the people we are', especially in relation to *character*; the sort of things I've been talking about. Importantly, though, it's also about how we may cooperate with the Lord as he transforms us into the people he intended us to be all along.

We'll major on that second aspect of it in next time. But for the moment, we're concentrating on how we've arrived at where we are. So, a question: what do you think is the primary moulding place; the main place of influence when it comes to shaping children as they grow up?

The family... parents and others with the responsibility of acting on God's behalf, so the children become the people he intends them to be. Proverbs 22:6: 'Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it'. That's *not* a *promise* from God – it's a *proverb*; an observation about how life is: 'Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it'. That's the way God designed things to run. If we're parents or grandparents, or aunties or uncles, or children's or youth workers, or members of the church family who have opportunities – inside the church and outside as well – to influence the shaping of children, then we have a part to play in God's scheme of things. We can be 'shapers for God'! Isn't that exciting! But it's also a big responsibility.

So, what did *we* need to learn when growing up, in order to be able to be a positive influence on today's children? Lots of things! But I'm just going to look at two this morning. First, I hope we learned to obey... Unfashionable, but very necessary!

Learning to obey

We need to be able to teach children and young people what it means to be obedient. Why? In part, because obedience is an essential life-skill. Several years ago, our elder son was one of the leaders who took a church group to India. Before they went, our other son said to a couple of his friends who were going, 'If he says something to you like, "We're leaving, NOW", don't argue, or say, "Hold on a minute". Just do as he says.' Our younger son knew that extremists had been causing lots of trouble in the area, killing people, setting fires to churches, and so on. And he'd detected that these friends had missed out on being trained to obey – as have so many young people since it became unfashionable. They were very likely to want to bargain for a bit more time. (Any parent ever heard that before?) And doing that could be putting *everyone* at risk. As part of that group in India, knowing what it meant to obey could have been life-saving. Of course, it's the same in everyday life here, isn't it: much younger children walking down the road, learning to stay on the pavement; learning to come when called, and so on.

So, we need to train children to obey, because it's an essential life-skill. But also because it's an essential part of their spiritual formation... because, for children, *learning to obey those to whom God has entrusted them*, is vital preparation for

learning to obey God.

Have you ever noticed that, when Jesus gave what we call 'the great commission', he said this (Matthew 28:19): 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you... *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...*

As children learn to obey in a healthy way – and I'm not talking here about being cowed into submission, or abused into compliance; I'm talking about responding appropriately to God-given authority – as children learn to obey in a healthy way, their self-discipline grows; their hearts are enlarged; their characters are formed. They're developing foundations which will enable them to stand when everything around is being shaken, *and they're receiving the framework for obeying everything the Lord Jesus has commanded them.*

So many problems in churches – and between churches, for that matter – can be traced back to an unwillingness to *obey everything that the Lord Jesus has commanded.* When we obey his command to love one another, for example: that does away with a whole load of aggravation; church divisions seem so silly when we're loving one another! If we were truly obeying the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbour as ourselves (Luke 10:27) – then we really would be 'the unstoppable church', wouldn't we...? Makes you think, doesn't it. This 'learning to obey' is foundational to so much...

If you think about it, a child who has been trained to obey, has also been trained to respond appropriately when they don't get what they want. I won't enlarge on this now. But just think of the Lord's Prayer: when we pray, 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done', are we saying to God, 'I'm ready to obey you, Lord'? I'm ready not to get my own way, if that's what You want...? Or are we praying for his will to be done generally in the world – but not necessarily in our particular corner of it?

'Your Kingdom come, your will be done'... I recommend praying that slowly a few times, asking God to show you whether or not you're truly ready to obey – or whether you're more into negotiation; reasoning with him when he asks you to do something you're not keen on!

So, that's the first major area of spiritual formation: being trained to obey – or not, as the case may be.

The second area is that of **developing a value system.**

Every family has a value system, even if that value system is 'anything goes'. So... what was the value system in your family of origin? Mulling this over could give you clues to your early spiritual formation, some of which may be helping you in your following of Jesus, and some of which may not.

As I mentioned earlier, parents and others are meant to be acting on God's behalf, shaping children into the people God intends them to be. Parents who have no faith can still contribute good things to this shaping process, if they value the things God values, like truth, justice, faithfulness and so on. Because that's what it's about – teaching children to value the things God values.

As we all know, it's the behaviour we model that our children pick up. The other day, I heard a lady saying that her husband had decided he'd better stop licking his plate after meals when their two year old started to copy him...! So, if we're to teach others to value what God values, and in particular that God is Number One, we really do have to be believing it. When I say 'believing it', I mean 'believing it and living it', not just saying the words. If we're to teach our children, and the other little ones who know us, that God is Number One, we have to demonstrate it in our own lives, in our family relationships, in the way we order our priorities.

A while back, I met a lady who used to come with her family to this church, now and then, but who hadn't been for years. She volunteered the information that it had become very difficult when her sons became interested in rugby, because the junior teams all play on a Sunday morning...

Now, we've brought up two sons, and I know how these conflicts of interest play out in families. It's not pretty! I can still remember! But think about what I've been saying about God being Number One... How will your children or grandchildren learn that God really *is* Number One, as opposed to just being *referred to as* Number One...? If every time a child wants something you immediately put them first, what are you teaching them? I don't mean that if a two-year-old insists that he needs the toilet you should start explaining that God is the boss of your life, not him... But if children never see what 'God being Number One' in someone's life means, how are they going to be able to teach that to *their* children?

Being in church on a Sunday or at home group during the week isn't the *only* way of demonstrating that God is Number One in your life; the way we live in between meetings inevitably speaks loudest to those close to us. But gathering together with God's other children is an important way of putting God first, *and* an opportunity for learning to be more like Jesus – valuing what God values. So anything that's frequently keeping us away has to be seen as an issue.

If we're teaching youngsters to pray the Lord's Prayer – 'Your kingdom come, your will be done' – but living according to *their* will, what will they be learning...?

I realise that some of you may be finding what I'm saying very challenging. I'm not saying it's easy – I know it isn't! – but it's important. So bear with me, and try to hear God in the middle of it all. I can't tell you what he wants you to do about anything, but maybe you could talk things through with your home group leader, or a friend. Ask them to help you think through the ordering of your priorities, and to pray with you as you seek to hear God – to hear what *he's* saying about the right way to respond.

Whatever you do, don't block your ears and give up because it's too difficult! If God is prodding you, resolve to act. Stay with the pain and grow through it! That's the way it works!

As I close, I'd like to return to the reading... Do you think Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were having a one-off very brave day when they told King Nebuchadnezzar that they had no intention of serving the so-called gods he'd made...? Of course not! Their characters had been formed over many years; they'd learned from those around them what it meant to obey the One True God, to put him first, in much less threatening circumstances... to *expect* great things of him; to *act* accordingly; and to *see* the result – expect, act, see, as we were being urged at our parish weekend. Taking a similar approach over many years, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had learned to value what God values; to put him as Number One in their lives... so that, when they were put to the test, their 'obedience muscles' were in tip-top condition, and they could say those amazing words which I'll paraphrase:

'We do not need to defend ourselves, because the God who is Number One in our lives is *able* to rescue us. *But even if he doesn't*, we will not make anyone else Number One. Our God still reigns.'

The heroes of faith I hope you'll be looking at over the next week or two using the second lot of study notes... their characters had also been formed such that they could stand up and be counted when it mattered. Now in case you're finding all this bravery a bit much, I've suggested you major on the story of Gideon. He was afraid – and he showed it! But God used him anyway! God was prepared to work *with* Gideon to help him to *grow* in trust, and that can be a real encouragement for us, if we're not sure we're ready to face the fiery furnace or the lions' den!

If you're aware that your spiritual formation hasn't yet made you fully the person the Lord would have you be – join the club! If you realise that you've missed out on aspects of character formation when growing up, that's OK: just as God worked with Gideon, he can work with you to move you on. If you're struggling to be an effective parent or grandparent – God wants to help. Ask for prayer at the end of the service if you'd like to.

God is ready to meet with each and every one of us right where we are, and to move us on *to be the people he knows we can be!* How exciting is that! God wants all of us to become increasingly like Jesus, who valued what God values, and who showed what it is to be a truly obedient human being. God is willing to put effort into moving us in that direction, so... are we willing to pick this up and run with it...? Because if we are, we'll become even more useful to him in our role as shapers of children, and encouragers of those around us.

It's important when God says something to us that we make some sort of response, and I hope that in your groups this week you'll be encouraging one another to do so. As we were reminded at the parish weekend, what we say to *one another* often has

much more impact than what's said from the front. But I believe that some will be helped by making a response right now. So if you're ready for God to do some important renovation work on your spiritual formation, on your character, and to make you a more effective shaper of those around you, would you like to stand and pray this prayer with me...

Lord you know our hearts, you know our characters... We invite you to come by your Holy Spirit, and to continue the work of grace you have begun in us. Lord, we want to cooperate with you, so please strengthen our wills to obey, and inspire us to choose to value all that you value... Lord, your Kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.