

As the lockdown continues, many people have nothing but time on their hands, and our news is fixated with time. How long with the lockdown last, how much more time before we can see our families and friends again, how much time before we can resume our church services and other activities? This morning I thought it appropriate that we focus on God's timing, and how it was God's design that we have time for others.

There's a story about a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it would be a long trip to where God lived, so he packed a suitcase full of small packets of Coco-Pops and some cans of Fanta, as they were his favourites, and he set off on his journey. He had only gone a short distance when he passed an older woman sitting on a park bench and staring into space.. She looked sad and lonely, so the boy went over and sat next to her. He opened his case, took out a packet of Coco-Pops and offered it to her. She gratefully took it and smiled at him. Her smile was so warm and wonderful that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a can of Fanta. Once again, she took it and smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon eating Coco Pops and drinking Fanta, watching the pigeons without saying a word to each other.

As it grew dark, the boy realized that he'd better go home and got up to leave. But before he had just a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the older woman and gave her a big hug. She gave him the biggest smile of all. When the boy got home, his mother noticed how happy he seemed. She asked him what he had done all day. He told her: *I had lunch with God. And you know what? She has the most beautiful smile that I've ever seen!*

Meanwhile, the older woman had returned to her home. Her son also noticed how happy and contented she seemed, so he asked what had made her so happy. The woman said: *I sat in the park and ate Coco-Pops with God. You know, he's much younger than I expected!*

What does God look like? Who does God resemble, and can we really see the face of God? Over the years, there have been people who claim to have seen the face of Jesus or the Virgin Mary in some odd places, the most famous example is the Turin Shroud. I have to admit I'm sceptical about some of this stuff, and I don't think we need look far too far to find the face of Christ. Matthew's gospel, chapter 25 gives us a hint about where to start looking: Jesus will say to those at his right hand: *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

These verses come from Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats, which is really about those who live as God's people and those who do not. It's how people treat each other that determine whether they are God's people. Through Jesus, God made the ultimate sacrifice and paid the ultimate price for our sakes. We've been made joint heirs with Christ and we are God's children; sisters and brothers with Jesus.

We know the Good News of Christ and we've been blessed beyond measure. And we're called to be a blessing for others simply by living for, and like Christ. And we do this by looking at the people of this world through the eyes and heart of Jesus. If we can do that, then we'll bless those around us, and we'll see the face of Christ, not in bits of cloth; but in the faces of each other. We will see the face of Christ in our family, friends and even in the faces of strangers. Just like the little boy or old woman in my story.

At this time of lockdown when our nearest and dearest may be slightly irritating us, it's helpful for us to try and see our loved ones through the eyes of Christ. Treat each of them as if they were Jesus, the honoured guest in your home, even if we share the home. Remember, although those closest to us often drive us mad, they too are children of God. So in a quiet moment, look at someone as if they were Jesus, and give thanks for them, then our attitude will change and we'll see the face of Christ in our loved ones.

What about strangers? We are especially called to look at strangers through the eyes of Jesus, because we never know when Jesus might appear! There's a legend about a king who had no children to succeed him on the throne. He had messengers post signs in every town of his kingdom, inviting qualified young men to apply for an interview with the king, so the king could choose a successor before he died. Two qualifications were stressed: The person must have a deep love for God, and a deep love for his neighbour.

A young man saw one of the signs. He had a deep love of God and neighbour and he felt a small inner voice telling him to apply for an interview. But the young man was so poor that he didn't have decent clothes to wear to the interview. Nor did he have the money to travel to the king's castle. So the young man prayed over the matter, and he finally decided to beg for the clothes and the provisions he needed. When everything was ready he set out and after travelling for month, the man caught sight of the king's castle. It was high on a hill in the distance.

At about the same time, he came across an old beggar sitting by the road. The beggar held out his hands and pleaded with a weak voice: *I'm hungry and cold. Could you give me something warm to wear and something to eat?* The sight of the beggar moved the young man. He took off his warm coat and swapped it for the beggar's tattered old coat. He also gave the beggar the little food he had for his return journey. Then he continued his journey in tattered clothes and without food for his return trip. When he arrived at the castle, guards met him at the gate. They took him to the visitors' area and after a long wait; the young man was led into see the king.

The young man nervously bowed low before the throne, and when he looked up he could hardly believe his eyes. He said to the king: *You were the beggar beside the road! That's right;* said the king. *Why did you play this trick on me?* The king replied: *I had to find out if you really did love God and neighbour.* Then the king told him he had proved himself and he would be heir to the throne. What a surprise! But then *what about the surprise for the characters in the parable of the sheep and the goats.*

They'd met Jesus in the face and presence of strangers and didn't even know it! We meet Jesus, and can see the face of Jesus every day in the face of family and friends, neighbours, and especially in the face of strangers. You never know when one of them, or all of them; will be the King! The lesson is that we're called to treat everyone as if they were our King, Jesus. Let's thank God that we've been blessed with the knowledge of Christ; and that this knowledge allows us to see Jesus in the faces of others.

In closing: I saw a cartoon that showed an old woman, sitting on a porch reading her Bible. Two teenagers passed by and one said to the other: *That's my grandma. She's studying for her finals!* Some people have devout lives but most are studying things that won't even be in the test! It won't matter how much Bible knowledge we have, if we can't see the face of Jesus in others, then our study will have been pointless. We know the Good News, and we have time to be a blessing to others. All we really have to know is Christ. All we really have to do is live like Him, and share His blessings. **Amen.**

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