

"Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight"

Please be seated...

Last week my family and I went to Spring Harvest, where we were joined by some of the youth group for a day and Stuart for an evening of worship. The days and evenings were packed full of teaching, worship and some play, and I have based today's talk on some of the things covered. Hopefully we'll hear some other people's perspectives at the end.

We spent a full 5 days with the main theme of ethics, from various different angles. I have picked out 1 mainstream which is more extensively covered in this book if you want to know more, or just in case you don't get what I am talking about!

If you like to do while listening there is an activity on the tables at the front here (and it doesn't necessarily have to be all children!). (make glasses with coloured cellophane – heart shaped?) And if you just like to think while listening what words would you use to describe characters we should see in each other as God's people?

So ethics – the point of the talks were not to scour through bible trying to find what God / Jesus said or implied for each ethical topic like war, relationships, or money. Each individual case is different with different circumstances, scale and outcomes. Besides there are so many modern situations to which there is no equivalent in the Bible for us to refer to God's response. We need to spend time with God to find out who we think he is.

So can anyone tell me how we find out and get to know God? (Bible, church, our own reason, our own experience).

Finding out about God is something we need to do so that in any situation we can ask ourselves what does God's love say to this situation? We too easily default to a fixed view of thinking of God as 'I am who I was' rather than 'I am who I will be'.

The Pharisees took this view of God being 'I am who I was' and tried to enforce rules, which had been made for a different time, too literally. So we were asked 'If you could make one rule what would it be?'. Does anyone have any rules they would like to suggest (the question wasn't always taken seriously so feel free if you want to have some fun with it)?

Some of the answers there included: No war other than in true self defence, Chocolate to have no calories, and the best one of all was that everyone should have to enter every building through a ball pool to stop people taking themselves too seriously! (we quite liked that one!)

If our religion was about following rules it would make ethics far easier but not practical. Rules need to change over time, even if the reason behind them remains the same. I guess the best example that comes to my mind is with children. We have a busy road outside our house, and so to keep Nathan and Toby safe we have rules. One is that Toby must be accompanied along the pavement, preferably holding

a hand (although sometimes my hands are a little full) to the car. But as Nathan is older he can walk to the car on his own as long as he stays on the pavement. The aim of the rule is the same, but the rule evolves, in this case as the children grow older. Other rules need to change too if we followed some of the rules in Leviticus the world would be a very different place.

So we can make the mistake of thinking that biblical ethics are set in stone, when, in fact, they are set in a story – and the story makes all the difference.

Learning to live as for Jesus is based on developing the right instincts and habits. Jesus, a story teller, helps to develop our character so we can respond to ethical issues with good choices. He shows us how to live then calls us to live exactly that way.

Forming of our own ethics is not just so we can form an opinion on the topical political issues in medicine or the environment or banking. Ethics is much more than that – its about becoming the sort of person God wills us to be in everyday life, our passions and perceptions and how we live them out.

One of the speakers was blind, she was very open and honest and admitted she wouldn't want it that way if she could choose, but that it did have some advantages. When ever she meets someone for the 1st time she can form no preconceptions. What a wonderful thought to be able to give everyone the same starting point, as no matter how much we try, not judging before some one speaks is very hard to do, but it is at this level that Jesus calls us to live out his ethics.

Are you about making a negative stance versus rules, or making a positive difference? The Sermon on the Mount was not another list of laws to surpass those preached and enforced by the Pharisees, but brought liberation and hope to ordinary people, that they were called to Jesus and could live beautifully, when before they had been viewed as anything but beautiful. Jesus goes beyond rules to the deeper meaning to heartfelt responses giving a new attitude to suffering, ourselves, and others.

But its not just an individual choice its also about the community we are together. We all have different backgrounds, which tend to give different viewpoints even of the same thing.(interaction opportunity with eagle?) – particularly apparent in today's me me me society we all want to feel different, but as a people here in church we have a difference – Jesus.(indicate to interactive people to move) He is drawing us to live as apprentices of him. As humans we learn our habits and practices from one another too. So we can develop our habits together as a community, learning from one another as we try to live out the moral vision of the biblical story.

Are we a community which reflects Gods character? As a group we need to be seen as one taking compassionate decisions, and courageous steps, and these becoming the natural thing to do. That doesn't mean we won't make mistakes, but we need to be prepared to take risks, be more open about life decisions and our mistakes, and to help each other through these.

Are we a community which challenges all areas of life from our questions and doubts, to how we talk about people?

A community where we don't fear conflict but confront it gracefully?

A community where we can find, and be, moral mentors? I think perhaps this would be helped by more integration and discussion over coffee. Somewhere where this has started to happen for me is through those helping at Parents and Tiddlers, its been great to start to get to know some people whose names I wouldn't have even otherwise known. **Mention lunch ? and I think that the lunch organised for this Sat. is another time where hopefully we can ask a little more than how people are.**

So we need to look at things with different eyes as hopefully our activity table will now show us.

Other people's experiences of Spring Harvest (Laura, Alan , Nathan, ...?)

The reading today, also ties in with the Spring Harvest theme covering the start of Paul's conversion. He was a leading persecutor of Christians and Jesus has to speak to him personally and make him blind to make him listen. But what a difference when Jesus lets him see again! He is the same man but so fundamentally changed that God changes his name, from persecutor to passionately following Jesus and building the church. I don't believe any of us have needed quite the same treatment to follow Jesus, but I hope we can listen to him and live our lives with something of the same passion for him.

Amen