

210117 Reflection – Seng Eng Low

Some of you might know that I have 2 children and my son Fred is the eldest. He's in his thirties now. But I want to tell you about when Fred was a baby. When Fred was born, we lived in Singapore, so from when he was about 4-5 months old, we used to bring him along when we went to dine at Chinese restaurants with the extended family. These restaurants were large, with a large staff. And often, there were numbers of waitresses just hanging around, with not much to do.

And they always noticed Fred. Because his father was a Caucasian, Fred looked different from the other Chinese babies who came to the restaurant. He had fair skin (as white as tofu) and reddish hair and light brown eyes rather than black. Not only that, from birth Fred was a happy baby, and very sociable. He was always smiling and contented and he would go to anyone, would let anyone carry him.

So when we went to these restaurants with Fred, the waitresses would notice his unusual looks and would hover over him, and coo at him. And Fred would always respond with a gorgeous toothless smile and hold out his arms to them. So before we had even properly settled down at our table, even before we had a chance to look at the menu, one of the waitresses would offer to take him from us and bring him to see the fish tanks.

Now if you have been to a Chinese seafood restaurant, you might know that they often have large fish tanks where they keep live fish and lobsters and such-like, where the seafood is kept alive until it is time to cook them. And a waitress, usually the head waitress, would offer to take Fred to see the fish. So off he would go with her. And we might notice out the corner of our eye that Fred would be passed from one waitress to another, while he smiled and gurgled at all of them, and exercised his baby charms.

With Fred taken care of, we could all have our meal in peace. Often, it was only after the bill was settled and it was time to leave that we remembered that we had come in with a baby. Where was Fred? And one of the waitresses would bring him back to us, he would still be beaming and waving his arms with glee, and she would reluctantly return him to his stroller. I know that I'm his mother but you just have to take my word for it- Fred was really an adorable baby.

In our Psalm for today, the Psalmist talks about God knowing us very, very intimately. God created our inmost being, he knit us together in our mother's womb. Such is God's intimate knowledge of us, he knows us through and through. As a mother, I knew Fred very well as a baby, but even I did not know

him as well as God knew him. God knew him before he was even born, *knew him even before his body was formed*. Knew all the days of his life before even one of them came to be. That's a rather mind-blowing idea, isn't it?

Who knows you best? Perhaps a friend or family member? Is there any person who knows you through and through? Is there any person who knows everything about you? Would you *like* anyone to know *everything* about you? To know every thought, every word you are about to say even before you have said it? For some of us, that would be an uncomfortable thought. We might not want anyone to know us that well.

But the psalmist tells us that that is how well God knows us. He knows when we sit and when we rise, he knows when we come and when we go, when we lie down and when we get up. He knows all our thoughts, our hopes and fears, our dreams and desires, our most noble ideas and our deepest secrets. God knows them all.

And the thing is, God knows all about you, and he loves you completely. God's love is not like human love; it is divine and it is unconditional. You don't have to be good for God to love you. You can't earn his love. It is freely given, and it is unwavering. Even when you are not at your best, God's love for you is unflinching.

It is not that God doesn't care whether you're good or bad, he does. Because God loves you, he wants the best for you, so he wants you to be the best person that you can be. But even when you are *not* at your best, even when you stuff up badly up (and we all stuff up because we are human) Even then, God's love for you is constant.

Have you ever known unconditional love? For some of us that is something we have never known, even as a child, and so it is hard for some of us to even imagine. But God's love is unconditional. And when we trust in God's unconditional love, we can live in joy, in peace and in freedom. That is God's desire for us- to live the abundant life. This is the life that God holds out to us.

When my son Fred was a baby, everyone showered him with love and kindness. So he never doubted for a moment that he was loved. When God looks at us, what does he see? He sees us as a beloved child. He looks at us with the eyes of love. He sees that we are wonderfully made. He loves us with an overflowing love that never changes, that never fails. He is present to us at all times, in this life until we come to the end of our lives. And even then, at the end of our lives, we will find that God is still with us, eternally.

The season of Epiphany is a time when we reflect on how we are to bring the good news. So it is important that you and I know with a deep heart-knowing that *we are loved by God*. God loves us. *This is the good news*. And this is the news we bring to the world. But before we can bring the good news, we must believe it. With all our heart. God loves you. Believe it.

Not only does God love you, God has called you. You are sitting in church today because God has called you.

When did you hear the call to follow? Perhaps you were like Philip? There you were, going along one day, minding your own business and Jesus happens along and says, 'Follow me,' and you did. Or maybe you were more like Nathanael, more of a sceptic, not so easily persuaded? Maybe you asked something like, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Do I really want to follow this Jesus? Does he really have something to offer me? It was only after Nathanael had a surprising encounter with Jesus that he realised that yes, this Jesus knows me. He is the Son of God! Yes, I want to follow him.

So when did you hear the call to follow? Even if you have been coming to church all your life, even if you started coming to church from when you were a tiny tot, brought by your parents, there must have been some point when you made the decision for yourself: yes, I want to follow Jesus. Somewhere along the line, maybe through attending Sunday school as a kid, or maybe it was through being invited to a church camp by a school friend, or maybe, as an adult being, you were invited to church by your neighbour, as was the case for me. But somewhere along the line, you were called. Jesus called you. And you responded.

Something caught hold of your heart, your mind, your hopes your dreams. Jesus the living Christ reached across space and time and made himself real to you in some form or fashion. He called you by name. He said to you, 'I know you; I have known you since before you were born. And I am calling you. Follow me.' And you said yes. You said, Jesus, you are the Son of God, the Messiah, and I will follow you. And so, now you stand in the company of Philip, and of Nathanael and that great cloud of witnesses. Called to follow and to share the good news that God loves us.

In the season of Epiphany, we focus on how we can bring the good news, and invite others to also follow Jesus. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't always find that very easy. Australia is a much more secular society these days than when we were younger, and people don't necessarily want to hear about Jesus. Don't you think that sometimes, it is easier to ask someone to

join your book club, or your walking group than to ask them to come to church?

And actually, I have it easier than most of you. Because I have been called to vocational ministry; I work in chaplaincy. So people *expect* me to talk about God. People expect me to invite them to church! And of course, I try to do that as much as possible, especially in my work situation. And how do people respond? Sometimes, they listen politely, and sometimes, they even attend one of my services. But often, I am told, no thanks, religion is not for me. I have even had the door shut in my face.

But I am mindful that we are not all called to public ministry. Not all of us are called to be ministers and chaplains. But whoever we are, and wherever we are in life, God calls us to be witnesses. So how do we know where we are called? I think the quotation from Frederick Buechner that we read may help point us in the right direction: "The place where God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." What gives you deep gladness? What are you passionate about? What gives you deep satisfaction? And where does that passion intersect with what the world hungers for?

We watched the video clip about OzHarvest, where one woman's passion not to see good food wasted when people are hungry has led her to found an organisation where like-minded volunteers could work together to save good food from going into landfill, and literally satisfying the world's hunger. Their passion was to feed people.

So what do *you* care about? What are *you* passionate about? And where can *you* contribute to the world's needs? The needs in your community? The needs in your country? And even the needs within your family and friendship circle. And as a church, how can we together, meet the needs in our community? This is what we need to discern together especially as we prepare to call a new Minister. How can we, St Ives Uniting Church, witness to the world about the love of God?

We are here to tell the good news. Sometimes, in this secular society, it may seem like a tall order, but we need to recognise what God sees in us. We need to see ourselves with God's eyes: we are each one of us fearfully and wonderfully made, and with Christ's life within us. And each one of us has been called by Christ to be a witness. This is who we are and who we are called to be. Amen

