

Sunday 14th May 2017

930 and 1115

**God's Covenant/God Reigns/A Loving
People/Our relationship with God**

If someone asked you what's most important to you in your life, what would you say? Maybe you would say "my family," or perhaps "my faith is what matters most to me." Or would you say "My top priority is to be successful?" Or perhaps what really makes your heart sing is seeing Brighton promoted to the Premier League.

But I'd like to come at this from a different angle and suggest that it's our relationships which are the heart of the matter. Including our relationship with God. So I'd like you to be thinking about your relationships and

what they're like. Here are three brief examples of my own. We live opposite the Coop in Meads Street. I have a relationship with Patti, the manager. But don't be startled. I assure you my relationship with Patti is entirely appropriate. I go into the Coop in the morning for the newspaper, Patti provides it and I pay. We have a brief chat. But we know very little about each other.

When I was a school teacher a relationship I had was with the Headmaster. I would see quite a bit of him. He was my boss and I kept in his good books. Partly because after all if I left the school I'd need a reference from him. I depended on him. It was a professional relationship with clear boundaries.

My relationship with my daughter Rosamund on the other hand is entirely different. It's based on love and on unspoken commitment to each other. We love spending time together. We know that we're always there for each other.

Today we're going to look at our relationship with God. Which one of those I've mentioned comes closest to describing yours?

Perhaps it's like mine with the Coop manager – asking for something frequently, but that's about it. Or maybe it's as with the Headmaster – recognising his authority and his influence but keeping a healthy distance so that he doesn't make too many demands.

The Bible makes is clear over and over again that neither of those two descriptions comes anywhere near to what is possible with God.

God calls us into a relationship with him through his son Jesus Christ which can be as committed and as fulfilling as any human relationship we have ever experienced. And more.

If someone I trust said to me “Would you like your relationship with God to be deeper?” I would say “Yes I'd like that very much but I could do with some help.”

If that applies to you as well the passages from Deuteronomy and from Mark's gospel are helpful.

Moses had spent many years with the Israelites since their miraculous liberation

from slavery in Egypt. Times of blessing as they trusted God.... and awful times when they didn't. He'd been to the top of Mount Sinai where God said: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession." And now Moses is giving his final sermon to the people of God before they leave him to enter the Promised Land of Canaan.

He is absolutely clear with them that what is at stake is nothing less than life or death. They've been wonderfully created in God's image. They've been called to become the people of God, they've been saved from bondage and now God's purpose is for his rescued people to build his kingdom. He wants to reign in their hearts. His covenant

is a promise of abundant life and blessings. But there's a condition: his people must obey his loving commands. "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."

"Choose life." For the Israelites it was literally a matter of life and death. If they didn't have God's protection, if they disobeyed him, they would be destroyed by their enemies.

God, through Moses, is also talking to us, today. We have to make a choice..... between spiritual life or spiritual death. God offers us abundant life. As Jesus says in

John's gospel, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."

How can we, in practice, come into this abundant life-giving relationship with God? Moses tells us the things we need to do. Firstly love God with all our heart...but what does that mean? I remember shortly after Jane and I started coming to St John's I said to Peter Pickett "I've been a believer for over 40 years in my head, but love needs to move into my heart." And Peter said "Yes...it needs to go right into your gut. Because when love goes deep into you that's also what flows out of you." How can that longest journey from the head to the heart happen?

If you love someone you spend time with them. Our previous vicar Alyson said to me "We need to hang out with God," which

made me laugh because it sounded weird from a vicar. But it's true isn't it? God delights in our company because he adores us.... and because he knows that when we're with him, - when we worship him, when we read his word, when we pray, when we marvel at creation – he is able to move our hearts, to transform us from within, to give us joy. So our love for him grows.

How can we be sure when we're doing loving things.... that it's really from the heart and not just for brownie points? The course we're following this year together has already been done at another church. I listened to the sermon for this week. The speaker asked some challenging questions. For example, "how do we react when someone boasts about their disreputable

lifestyle? Or when we realise that we've been unloving ourselves." Questions like this can help us to measure how much our love for God is from the heart.

Then Moses says "Listen to God's voice." God speaks to us in many ways. Through his creation, through what we see going on around us, through what people say to us, through our consciences, sometimes through our dreams.

And he speaks to us through his word, the Bible.

In our car we have an instruction manual. I hardly ever look at it because it's boring and because in any case I can never make head nor tail of it. I leave it to Jane to sort it out.

Our instruction manual for our relationship with God is the Bible but it's so much better than that. The more I read it the more I want to read it. Exciting stories from history, inspirational guidance. And God doesn't say "There's the Bible, figure it out by yourself." As we read it prayerfully his Holy Spirit is with us whether or not we're aware of it, encouraging us, correcting us.

And Moses says "hold fast to God."

The Israelites were broken people. When things got really bad in the wilderness their trust in God evaporated and they paid the price. So Moses reminds them that when they're in the Promised Land it's not going to be a bed of roses, they'll need to hold fast to God who is walking with them.

It's the same for us. We're all broken as well. We've all been through the mill at some time. I'm sure there are some of us here this morning carrying burdens. So God says to us "hold fast."

I remember going with my father as a boy to watch my football team, Fulham. In those days of of standing up in heaving crowds I had to hang on to my father for dear life. We need to hang on to Jesus. He doesn't promise to take away our pain.... but he does promise to be with us, sharing it. Nothing can separate us from his love.

God longs to reign in your heart. Why? Because he loves you.... And because he knows what's best for you.... And because that is how he is building his kingdom... through his people.

Does it sound too hard to let God reign in your heart? Moses says. "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. No, the word is very near you."

We don't have to climb a mountain like Moses to experience God. God has sent his son Jesus who is with us and who is for us.

The disciples had been broken by their Lord's crucifixion, yet on the road to Emmaus his presence and his words caused their hearts to burn. So also can our hearts be transformed by our walk with Jesus.