

## *An Extraordinary, Ordinary Life*

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### A REJOICING HEART

At the start of 2017 I preached a sermon with the title “Vision” at the beginning of the series in Ecclesiastes. The title of the series, you may remember, was “The Extraordinary, Ordinary Life.” That sermon, the first in the series began like this:

*As 2016 drew to a close, the media spent time remembering people who had died during the year. Mostly they remembered what those people had achieved.*

*David Robert Jones, or David Bowie was one. A music career that spanned five decades, produced sales of 140 million records; 11 No 1 albums; a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A stunning career by any measure.*

*Cassius Marcellus Jr. Or Muhammad Ali. Some say the greatest sportsman ever – he being one of them! The only man to have won the heavyweight boxing championship of the world three times. Sports Illustrated ranked him the greatest athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the BBC as the sports personality of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.*

*Terry Wogan, Sir Terry Wogan MBE. Beginning with the radio show “Wake up to Wogan” there followed Blankety Blank, Come Dancing, Wogan and the Eurovision Song Contest and of course, Children in Need.*

That wonderful little book called Ecclesiastes has a verse that challenged us:

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart (NIV) (Ecclesiastes 7 v 2)

The CEV translation reads:

It's better to go to a funeral than attend a feast; funerals remind us that we must all die.

My interpretation of this verse was this:

“Everyone will die, and wise people think about that.”

Here’s what we got to thinking about back in January of this year.

*When the media produced a list of people who had died in 2016, only certain people made it onto their list and it seemed that the people who made it onto their list had found favour in their eyes. To find favour in the eyes of the media you have to have done something, achieved something the media notice. So it seems they found a way to measure a life and by their measure only certain people make it onto the list.*

*It raised the question: How do you measure a life – your life? Well... how do you...measure your life, that is?*

*In January I posed this question: “Do you suppose God has a list?” And here’s another thought: “If God does have a list, how do you measure up?”*

Here’s a lovely verse:

However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10 v 20)

Here was my amplified version of Ecclesiastes 7 v 2: “All of us will die, that’s certain. And the wise among us will think carefully about what we do with our lives, knowing what’s coming, even if we don’t know when it’s coming. And the wise will think about it in the light of the truth that names are written in heaven.”

If you want to live to get your name on the list that the media will write, you must set your heart on achieving things, accruing things, and making your mark. And if you do enough of that – you may make it onto their list.

To find your name written in heaven – well that’s something staggeringly different. To find names in heaven the work has already been done and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, you need to do, or can do, to add to that work. What’s done is enough, absolutely, totally enough, and God desperately wants names written in heaven. And God desperately wants your name written in heaven – and the moment a heart turns towards him, something extraordinary happens.

I am going to read three well known stories about what happens in heaven when a heart turns towards God and then I'm going to ask you to talk about it for a moment with the people around you.

### **The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup> I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

### **The Parable of the Lost Coin**

<sup>8</sup> "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

### **The Parable of the Lost Son**

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

<sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

(Luke 15 v 1-31)

Here’s what I’d like you to think about for a moment: What is the main thing these three stories are trying to say?

Well, it could be:

That God searches for those who are lost – that is wonderfully true.

That you are of great value to God – that is wonderfully true.

That God loves us enough to let us wander off and make our own choices without giving up on us – that is wonderfully true.

But I suggest the most staggering thing these three stories show us, is how much heaven celebrates when a heart turns towards God. You want to start a party in heaven? Then turn your heart towards God. Heaven gets excited beyond words when a heart turns towards God. When a heart turns towards God, heaven explodes. When your heart turns towards God, heaven explodes.

Here's a challenging thought: As far as I can tell, there is nothing to tell us that heaven throws a party over your achievements; over how much money you make; or how many houses you have; or what kind of holidays you go on; or who you know; or what job you do. Heaven throws a party when your heart turns towards God.

Why do you suppose that might be? Well maybe it has to do with how we measure ourselves. Mostly, we live in our own story, where mostly we see what's tangible, here and now, and mostly, we want to be the hero of our own story.

Heaven sees a very different story, a much bigger and a much better story. Heaven sees a different hero, one who loves us because he loves us, because he loves us.....

We, mostly, only see what's right in front of us. Heaven sees something far bigger and far better. Could it be that Father, Son and Spirit, the whole company of the heavenly host, throws a party like you've never seen, because they know something we mostly don't?

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said "God is dead!" Because he was an atheist, he didn't actually believe in a God who had actually died, but rather the concept of God as held in Christian and western civilisation, had died. Nietzsche was convinced that the death of God in this way was not actually a good thing because without a Christian view of the world, what was holding the world together?

So... here's a challenging question: "What would the world be like if God wasn't there – if God wasn't present?" The world is a challenging place now isn't it: the conflict, the violence, the hatred, the selfishness, the prejudice, the injustice that so often fills our hearts. If God wasn't present there would be no forgiveness, no hope, no acts of kindness, no words or deeds of love, no purpose.

A world without the presence of God, a world lived in the absence of God would be hell... wouldn't it? When your heart turns towards God, you are saved from the absence of his presence – and heaven sees and heaven rejoices! Heaven rejoices because heaven sees the bigger and better story that you are not without forgiveness or hope or kindness or love or purpose. Heaven rejoices because heaven sees the majestic, mighty, wonderful presence of God even when we can't or don't. When a heart turns towards God – heaven rejoices in the bigger and better story of God's magnificent presence.

Here's a lovely, absolutely beautiful thought: When a heart runs towards God, heaven rejoices because it knows what is waiting. The heavenly host know what awaits those whose hearts turn toward God... and they almost can't wait for the excitement it brings them. They've seen the banquet prepared, they've heard the music...and they can't wait for you to arrive. They long to see your face, but they much, much more, long to see you! And when you arrive at the party something wonderful will happen – you will be changed in the blink of an eye and you will be like Jesus himself!!

We have not yet been shown what we will be in the future but we know that when Christ comes again, we will be like him. (1John 3 v 2)

You will be a blessing in heaven! You will!

You will be God's completed work of art! You will!

You will have a heart like Jesus' heart! You will!

You will love with a perfect love! You will!

You will worship like no-one's watching! You will!

You will fully hear each word God speaks! You will!

Your words will be like jewels! They will!

Your thoughts will be like treasures! They will!

You will be guiltless, fearless, flawlessly discerning, fully loving, freely worshipping! You will!

That is God's bigger and better story and the whole company of heaven rejoices when a heart turns towards him because they see what we don't yet see!

Friends, a rejoicing heart is one whose name is written in heaven. A rejoicing heart is one who knows the work has been done and there's nothing it can add or need do because that work is enough! A rejoicing heart is one who lives in the bigger and better story where God is the hero. A rejoicing heart is one assured of God's divine presence now and can look forward to the party of all parties!

How's your heart?

Allow me one final challenge.

Every person you will meet has an invitation to the party, but not everyone wants to turn their heart towards God. That is the tragedy of the human heart. But perhaps we can become part of God's bigger and better story as we stir up hearts and point them to the party!

And the question becomes this: How much do we really care about the hearts of others? Heaven explodes when a heart turns towards God. What about you? A rejoicing heart explodes when a heart turns towards God.

Our vision statement reads: CBC will be bursting with life!

Perhaps we might say it this way: "CBC is full of rejoicing hearts – rejoicing that their names are written in heaven and others are turning to God!"

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017, by Rev. Ian Phillips.