

“LOOKING LIKE YOUR DAD”

1 John 3:1-3

When the photographs appeared after each of the weddings in our family, there were the inevitable comments about me from family and friends which went along the lines of “Ooh, you do look like your Dad.” They were slightly more acceptable than, “Ooh, you do look like your brother”, but not everyone necessarily likes being compared with their father, do they? And if you ever say to a woman, “Gosh, you’re getting like your mother” – well, that’s a bit like signing your own death warrant. Actually, as it happens, I do share some of the characteristics of my handsome and well-groomed father – the rugged jawline, the boyish good looks, the appealing glint in the eye – so it’s quite a compliment, really.

In many ways, we take it for granted that children will share some of their parents’ features, both in terms of appearance and in terms of behaviour and character. However much we might want to deny it or dismiss it, there’s a fair chunk of our parents’ DNA in all of us, so there are bound to be some similarities. And there’s a fair bit of God’s DNA in all of us, as well. In fact, the Bible tells us that we were made in his image – all of us, male and female. But, as we’ll see in a minute, that hasn’t really worked out in quite the way it was intended. The good news (in every sense) is that we will one day be like him again – that is something that we can really look forward to. And it’s something John emphasises here in the part of his First Letter that we read a few moments ago.

In fact, if you have a close look at John’s letters – there are three of them, as well as his Gospel – you’ll see that an awful lot of his vocabulary has to do with children and parents. He refers to the recipients of his letters as “*dear children*” and writes a lot about the Father. Clearly John has retained a fair bit of what Jesus talked about that referred to his Father. God is the perfect Father and is exemplified in Jesus. Listen to this passage from *John 14*.

Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’

Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’

Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.’

Building on those words, John makes it clear here that we have the amazing hope of one day being like Jesus – and therefore like the Father – too. That is something wonderful to look forward to. And these verses provide a great basis for that expectation, that hope. In these few sentences we read of **The**

Premise of that, **The Promise** and **The Practice**. Let's spend a few moments looking at each of those in turn.

1. THE PREMISE

Now, for some people, the image of God is that of a mighty avenger, someone who goes around smiting people and causing all kinds of havoc. There is, of course, a strong element of that in God's character – and that is how, eventually, he will deal for good and all with the problem of evil in his word. It's not necessarily what we want to be, although there are Christians around who seem to want to adopt that particular image of him. But the basis of our becoming like our Father is set out in unmistakable fashion here by John. It is all founded on the truth of God's love. If you want another theme that is prominent in this First Letter of John, then it's love (we'll have a look at that next week, all being well). Our Father is a God of love. In fact, John tells us explicitly in chapter 4 that “*God is love*” (4:8,16).

Not only is God the ultimate manifestation of love, but he pours that love out on his creatures. Specifically, he pours it out on us (3:1). And, wonderfully, he “*lavishes*” it on us. Isn't that a great word? He “*lavishes*” it on us – the word itself even *sounds* lush and prodigal! You see, that's a theme that runs throughout the Bible: God's abundance. He never scrimps on his love. He never holds back his love for us. Again and again we are told of how God provides more than we need, more than we can imagine. He doesn't give us just the bare minimum. How often do we find ourselves saying to someone who thanks us for a favour, “Oh, it's the least I can do”. Why do we only do the least for people? But God always gives his people the most.

From the amazing fecundity of the Garden of Eden, through the promise to his people of “*a land flowing with milk and honey*”, to the provision of food for 4,000 and 5,000 people by his Son – with basketsful of left-overs – and the extravagant gift of his own life on the cross of Calvary, God promises more than enough. The Hebrew prophets foretold a kingdom in which all have more than enough, where all creation is fed and watered and sustained by a God of unending love and compassion. And wherever you look, you can see the ways in which God's love has been poured out. It may have been misused, abused, misappropriated, rejected or ignored by some people, but his love is there for those who want it.

It's a love that is shown in creation, as we've already mentioned. God created man and woman in his image, sharing his characteristics, filled with his love, surrounded by his bounty. That was the original plan – co-workers in creation, co-stewards of this world, co-rulers with God. But, as we know, that image was tarnished, distorted, perverted as sin took a grip on the hearts of men and women. No longer

did his creatures share his image. No longer did the children look like the Father. Something had to be done.

And that something was a plan of redemption, a project to try and return things to the way they should have been. God did not want his beloved creatures to be such poor representations of him, nor did he relish the thought that his justice and righteousness would mean that he had to destroy anything tainted with sin. So, having lavished his love on humanity in creation, he now lavished his love on them – on us – in redemption. He wanted the image restored. He wanted his children to be like him again. And somehow, in ways which we can never fully understand this side of eternity, Jesus' life, death, resurrection and exaltation made that possible. The death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection restored the possibility of our looking like our Father again.

Jesus defeated evil on the cross, then punched a hole in death and walked through it to the life of the restored Kingdom, making a way for us to follow him into that same eternal Kingdom as people who bear the perfect image of the Father. As we place our faith in Jesus and then struggle to follow him and his words day by day, so we are gradually becoming like him – imperfectly, at the moment, but one day, perfectly. Which is what the second point is all about.

2. THE PROMISE

God has provided the basis for all this in his astonishing love. And he promises us here that “*we shall be like him*” (3:2). It says it here in God's word, so that's a promise. There's a bit of debate about whether the “*him*” here is God or Jesus, but, in the light of what Jesus said in that passage from John's Gospel we referred to earlier, that's really a moot point. If we are like Jesus, we'll be like the Father.

And just as that theme of abundance and extravagance is to be found throughout the Bible, so too is this idea of being like Jesus. It's a theme that runs through the letters of Paul just as much as the writings of John. Listen to these words:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18)

The Lord Jesus Christ, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.
(Philippians 3:21)

That's a promise from God. We are going to be transformed – and that transformation is starting now! As soon as we start to put our faith in Jesus, as soon as we recognise what God has done for us, as soon as we begin to accept God's promises and appropriate them for our own lives, that transformation into the likeness of God the Father begins. In some people the change is dramatic and startling. I've come across people whose conversion has been sudden and spectacular and a change in behaviour has been immediately apparent. Others start asking them what's happened, why the change? Why don't you do this or that anymore? [Bobby Ball] In others, it can be gradual and difficult to spot from day to day, but it's still happening – and you can see it when you look back. Does anyone ever ask you why you're different – different from them? Different from how you used to be?

And, as with everything else in this great plan of redemption and restoration, this all begins with Jesus. This is from that great passage in *Colossians 1*:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation ... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.

(Colossians 1:15,19)

We are slowly but surely becoming more like Jesus and therefore more like the Father. It isn't a physical thing, otherwise we'd all end up looking exactly the same; and Jesus is looking for disciples, not clones. But it is to be seen in the transformation of our attitudes and character. We should be thinking differently and so behaving differently. The beauty of Jesus should be shining through our lives day by day. There should be something about us that causes people to say, "I want to have what she's got". There's a great song by the band The Electrics, which talks about this idea of standing out as people being transformed, and it has a chorus that goes, "*I don't know what you're drinking, but pour me a pint as well.*" Which leads us on to our third and final point.

3. THE PRACTICE

If we have this hope – the hope that we will eventually be like our Father, eventually his image in us will be perfectly restored – then we need to live like it. Yes, God transforms us through the work of Jesus and the power of his Holy Spirit, but we are called to play a part in that too. If we know we are to be like him, then live in the light of that. Or, as John puts it here, "*Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself.*" We are to have some input into that change.

We've already said that love and abundance and being like Jesus are powerful themes in the Bible. So too, is transformation. In fact, that is probably the greatest theme of all. As God transformed the chaos of nothingness into a world of diversity and colour and order, as he transformed the fortunes of his people

through slavery and escape and exile and restoration, as he transformed the hopes of all people through the life and death and resurrection and exaltation of his Son, so we are to allow the transforming work of his Holy Spirit to affect our lives. A key verse for all who claim to follow Jesus is *Romans 12:2*, “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” Your attitudes have got to change. This isn’t just about behaviour modification – which Pavlov managed to do with his dogs and Skinner with his rats – this about deep down changes in attitudes and thinking, about a new worldview, about a completely different perspective.

Jesus reminds his followers in The Sermon on the Mount, that he is to be their example because he is doing what his Father wants – “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (*Matthew 5:48*). Now some people look like their dads – they can’t help it: it’s that DNA stuff again. But some people act like their dads as well. There’s a guy in Lichfield I often see around. I’ve been noticing him since he was probably primary school age and he’s now in his late 20s, I guess. He has always been a little copy of his dad, like two of those Russian dolls – he dresses like him, walks like him, uses his hands like him. In a sense we are, because of our common humanity, all images of our Father – although very imperfect and sometimes very distorted ones due to the presence and influence of sin – but we are called to act like our Father as well. We are called to “*be perfect*”, or, as Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel, “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*” (*Luke 6:36*) – show that same love that God has lavished on you.

Clearly, that’s not going to be easy. We desperately need the help of God’s Holy Spirit. But we also need to follow closely the example of the one who is most like the Father already. That example is obviously Jesus himself. The writer of *The Letter To The Hebrews* has this to say:

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(*Hebrews 12:1,2*)

Do you want to be like your Heavenly Father? Well, the Bible tells us that you will be one day – that’s a sure and certain hope. That’s his plan of redemption and restoration, renewing in you and me the image that we once bore perfectly and which has become so horribly disfigured by the ravages of sin. He has lavished his love on us in the pursuit of that aim. And you can start that process now, you can start to be transformed into the likeness of your Father God by allowing his Holy Spirit to renew you from within and by focussing your gaze on Jesus, the One who shows us in every detail of his own life what the Father is like.