

Sunday 9th May 2021

led by Tim Dutton and Jeff Ffoulkes

The **Methodist Church** 
Ashbourne Methodist Circuit 22/11



Call to Worship:

Although we are apart - we are together

Our faith,
and our willingness to worship,
unites us

We come together
to thank our God for looking over us,
and for being our refuge
during these difficult times

And so we come, as one body,
to spend time with Christ
and our brothers and sisters in faith. Amen

Hymn: Down the mountain STF 377

Down the mountain the river flows
And it brings refreshing wherever it goes
Through the valleys and over the fields
The river is rushing and the river is here
*The river of God sets our feet a-dancing
The river of God fills our hearts with cheer
The river of God fills our mouths with laughter
And we rejoice for the river is here*

The river God is teeming with life
And all who touch it can be revived
And those who linger on this river's shore
Will come back thirsting for more of the Lord

Up to the mountain we love to go
To find the presence of the Lord
Along the banks of the river we run
We dance with laughter,
giving praise to the Son

All-age talk

This morning, we're continuing with the gardening theme that Stuart started last week – but the first thing to say is that I'm not a gardener!

Just after Sue and I were married, we moved into a house in Northampton which had a small garden. I think that she had gone shopping when I noticed a load of weeds growing around a tree that we had – so I set to with a hoe and removed the lot, chucking them in the compost bin.

Unfortunately, when she arrived home and saw what I had done she was not terribly pleased. I had just cleared all the ground cover plants that she had planted around the tree !!!!

However, I have always been interested in Bonsai trees, and over many years have tried to grow them from seed or saplings. I even bought a book on a different technique called Kamuti.



Whereas Bonsai trees sometimes end up with thick trunks and wired branches to sculpt them, Kamuti works on sculpting both the root ball and the foliage. The word comes from the African Shona language meaning 'small tree' Now, this sounds as if I know what I'm talking about, and know what I'm doing – but as you'd see from the poor specimens at our house – after many years of trying I have a long way to go!

Basically, it's all about nature and nurture. The difference between the way that the tree wants to grow – and the way I interfere with that process through my nurturing.

So, to get the perfect result you have to be very careful in the way you nurture the tree – from pruning to watering to feeding – and as you can see my nurturing of these trees has not been good!!!

However, my own life is a balance between nature and nurture. My inbuilt nature is being constantly nurtured by God – and I still have a long way to go!!

But, unlike me God will always have the time and patience to continue my nurturing process.

Prayers

Lord Jesus, as we experience the sun on our faces, may we be reminded that it is You who created the sun and the earth on which we live.



As we experience the rain on our faces, may we be reminded that you send the rain to water the ground and provide us with food.

As we experience the wind on our faces may we be reminded, as guardians of our planet, that we need wind to provide us with power.

As we experience the beautiful countryside around us, may we be reminded, that it is You who created that beauty.

Help us to be reminded, daily, of Your presence and guiding light in our lives

And for those times when we choose to ignore that guiding light and walk our own way – it is a path to nowhere.

But You are a merciful and compassionate Father, who only wants the best for us – and if we confess our sins to you – You forgive us, help us, wrap your loving arms around us – and stand with us in all life's troubles

For Your love is the anchor, the one sure thing that holds us safe.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father.....



Introduction to today's theme

Today's theme is about nature and nurture and its impact on our lives. We will be thinking about physical, mental and spiritual elements, and the transformational change which comes about when we accept Jesus into our lives.

Reading:

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

The greater glory of the new covenant

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no



glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.



Hymn:

Love divine, all loves excelling STF 503

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heav'n, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art.
Visit us with thy salvation;
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

Come, Almighty, to deliver,
let us all thy life receive.
Suddenly return, and never,
nevermore they temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Sermon

The arguments about nature versus nurture have been rumbling on for years and years, but have become more prominent recently because of research in genetics and the science of the brain.

On one side of the argument are those who believe that nature (I nearly called them naturists then!) is the main determinant in the way our lives pan out. On the other side are those that believe that if you nurture people in a different type of environment, you can change their natural disposition.

And then there is a third group who believe that it is a mixture of the two.

Let's start with NATURE. The genetic argument, that we inherit the genes of our parents and that becomes our default position. That our intelligence, our natural talents, and our personality traits are all a product of our family genes. And of course, our physical appearance – can you spot the difference?



What about you? Have you ever said, or heard, “she looks the spit of her mother”, or “he’s his father’s son”

If I look at myself in the mirror, I probably have a bit of both of my parents in my face. But what about mentally, socially, emotionally, or artistically. I think I have probably inherited some of my mum’s musical ability and maybe some of her thoughtfulness. And I have certainly got some of my dad’s planning and organisation skills. I also remember his phrase “if a job is worth doing, it’s worth doing well” although my dad’s interpretation of ‘well’ sometimes felt like perfection and that can sometime be seen as a negative rather than a positive because nothing you do is quite good enough.

In our family, my wife and children have been known to say to me – you’re turning into your dad (or grandad!).

Or maybe the genes miss a generation. My daughter Abi is an avid reader of fiction, but that might come from her grandma Dutton, certainly not from me.

I wonder, how many of your parents’ characteristics have you inherited and how have they shaped your life? What habits, what attitudes, what personality traits?

If you look at this list, what is your natural default position?

Be perfect
Please people
Hurry up
Be strong
Try hard

And can you blame it all on your genes?

Of course, my reference point is a close family unit of a mum and dad who were happily married for over 40 years and 3 pretty normal kids (although I’ll let you be the judge of normal!). But I am acutely aware that not everyone is as fortunate as me – and for you, it may be that your childhood was one of much more hardship. There are those who do not know who their natural parents are, those who are brought up by just one parent, those who cannot cope with parenthood and others who step in to foster and adopt (I thank God they do). Even this week, we have seen pictures of a beautiful baby abandoned on a park bench.

Then there are the recent controversies about genetic engineering which raise serious questions about interfering with nature. On the other hand, many couples see a positive side to advances in technology when we think about developments like IVF and surrogacy.

So for those who advocate nature as the reason people are like they are, there is little choice. Most people are made up from the genes of their biological parents, both good and bad.

And for those that inherit bad genes, their lives can be difficult. I don’t know if you are a fan of crime dramas like *Line of Duty* (what an unsatisfactory damp squib of an ending that was last Sunday!), but in many of them, people are fighting their past. I don’t know if you watched the last series of *Unforgotten*, but one of the characters there came from a long line of criminals. His family was full of gang members and drug dealers, so he grew up seeing abuse and violence. His mother was the only person who could see his plight and tried

to get him out of the situation. He got a job and moved away from the family home. He joined the police and got married. He had a disabled son who he could focus on and raise funds for disabled charities. He had seemingly left the toxic life of crime behind. So it was a surprise when he turned out to be the murderer! When he was interviewed, he said that he just couldn't resist. That default position was just in him, part of his DNA, and he couldn't change the way he was. It was so ingrained in his psyche that he couldn't walk away.

But does it have to be like that? Those who argue for NURTURE would say no. They would say that you are a product of your environment. So if you grow up in a positive environment, you become a positive person..... and vice-versa. As you go through your early formative years, you still don't have much choice, or power, but your early childhood experiences can have a significant impact on your future life. You may have been like me and grown up in a loving family with a happy childhood. Others have not been so lucky. I know this is a sensitive subject for many people, but if you grow up with a set of negative circumstances in a challenging home, they can stay with you for a long time. You can talk to my wife about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – it is her specialist Mastermind subject!

And the pandemic has exacerbated the situation for many people. We have seen the gap grow between the have and the have nots. I count myself lucky during lockdown – I can be in beautiful green countryside in a few minutes and go for a walk, or bike ride in clean fresh air. I have a garden to sit in and enjoy. I have a job and a warm house, and people to talk to. But what about those in high rise flats, in overcrowded bedrooms, those who live alone, those who have lost their jobs, those with food poverty, those suffering from domestic abuse?

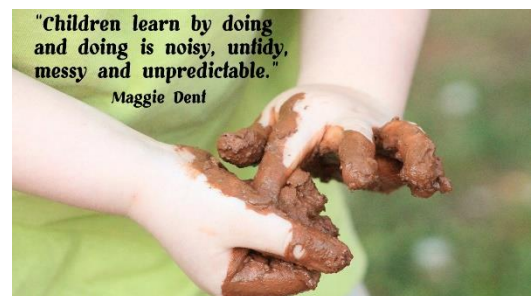
After the service, just spend a few minutes thinking about the people and experiences you have had during your life which have had the most impact on your life.

Most of you will know I am in the world of education and the lockdown has been a challenge for schools – trying to maintain a clean and safe learning environment within the school buildings, whilst also trying to provide a similar offer to those learning at home, where much is dependent on parents and carers and

whether they have had sufficient remote digital devices for all their children.

The best schools have taken the opportunity to build relationships with parents, communicate with them more and involve them in their child's education. Often compensating for their lack of positive experiences at home, going beyond the academic learning. Many schools have abandoned the traditional curriculum and focussed on personal development, social skills, emotional health and well-being. Trying to look at the full range of intelligences which will shape their future thinking and life chances.

They have created a stimulating learning environment where children can be creative, where they feel safe to share their feelings. And when they have been at home, they have been encouraged to go outside, to exercise, to keep body and mind healthy. Becky won't mind me telling you that each week during lockdown, parents were given a weekly challenge to finish with their children and to submit their photos to share with everyone. Things like making an owl out of sticks, painting with bubbles, going on a nature scavenger hunt. And one of the first things they did when they were back at school was making a mud slide. Giving children memorable experiences does help shape them.



I doubt whether they will remember their SATs results, or their fronted adverbials, but they will remember the fun they had on that mud slide! I could digress more into the inequalities within our education system, but I don't want to get political. So I better move on to the final part of this sermon which moves us from the nature-nurture theme to transformational change.

We can probably agree that our lives are affected by both nature and nurture – our physical and mental make-up and wellbeing, our decision making and our life choices. If we are only a product of our genes, or our earthly environment, then there is an inevitability that our future is determined by other people.

As John Mayer asks in one of his songs, “Could I change it if I wanted, can I rise above the flood? Will it wash out in the water, or is always in the blood?”

But what about our spiritual lives? Change is described in the dictionary as this. It is a verb therefore demands some action. Not just to be different, but to be transformed.



Here are some quotations about different aspects of change from psychologists, to authors, to politicians...

“If there is anything we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in ourselves.” (*Carol Gustav Jung*)

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” (*Mahatma Gandhi*)

“If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living.” (*Gail Sheehy*)

But as Christians, the good news is that we can look beyond the earthly, to the heavenly. We can look beyond the rules and restrictions which other people make and experience the freedom which Paul was talking about when he addressed the Corinthians. In the passage we heard earlier from Chapter 3, he talks about the new covenant – the old is gone, the new has come. He tells them that the law of Moses is old news – verse 13 says: “We are not like Moses, who would put a veil on his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it whilst the radiance was fading away. He refers to the old covenant and calls it dull. And he then contrasts this with the new covenant, the change that is made when we choose to follow Christ – verse 16 says that when we turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away and we are free. It reminds me of other metaphors in the bible like ‘the scales fell from my eyes’, or in the hymn – “my chains fell off, my heart was free“.

Change is possible, but only through faith in Jesus – when we turn to him, our past life is gone. All the nature and nurture can be left behind, and Jesus takes control.

And verse 18 is clear that when we have the Spirit of the Lord inside us, “we are transformed into his likeness.”

Is that our experience? Our decision to follow Jesus is a transforming choice – it means a change of lifestyle. Repentance is about making a U -turn, changing direction completely, travelling on a new path.

As our liturgy says, no longer our own, but yours. It means a change in our motivation - no longer being selfish but thinking about and caring for others.

God gives us all that choice. He did not create us as autonomous robots. We can tick that box “I am not a robot.” He wanted us to think for ourselves, to ask questions, to be curious, so we can make informed choices. We know that because of nature or nurture or a mixture of both, some people have not experienced that choice. They have not had opportunities to thrive. They have been indoctrinated to think and behave in a particular way, often down a path of evil rather than good. The good news is that God can break that cycle. The Bible tells us that despite all our past sin, the death and resurrection of Jesus has paid the price for all of us – an opportunity to be born again as a different person.

A decision for Jesus means a new set of attitudes and behaviours, becoming more humble and more loving. Remember those famous words from Philippians 2 which remind us that “our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”, the servant king.

I wonder if we can think back to the time when we became a Christian – what changed straight away and what took longer to adjust. One of our church members told me the day he gave his life to Jesus, he stopped swearing immediately; another said she suddenly became aware of other people’s needs and found herself offering to help them.

Change is something that many people find difficult. One of my favourite jokes from the Edinburgh Festival was back in 2017 – “I’m not a fan of the new pound coin. But then again, I hate all change!” We also know that change takes time to accept and adapt to. We think about those familiar stories about moving the piano an inch a week to get it to the other side of the church.

But this pandemic has made everybody change. In the past year, we have all had to change – it has been an unprecedented leveller at a world level. And we have had to do it immediately. It has been amazing how quickly people have adapted – I think the word

is agile – and taken opportunities to look at things in a new way.

Not just change as individuals, but as a whole church community. Think about the way we have changed our worship, our church activities, our communication with each other. We have retained, and in some ways enriched, our fellowship by connecting in different ways.

I finish with an amazing example of transformational change from a woman in prison. It is just one of 40 stories of hope from a book Enid gave me for Christmas a few years ago – how faith has changed prisoners' lives. Like the character in *Unforgotten*, she came from a dysfunctional family where nature and nurture were both working against her. She lived in Moss Side and was physically abused by her alcoholic mother. In her teens, she frequented the Hacienda Nightclub in Manchester and became addicted to ecstasy. She got married, but due to her addiction, she lost her husband and 3 children. Despite getting a degree in criminology, she ended up in an alcohol related relationship and ended up in prison after stabbing someone. She met the prison chaplain, who prayed for her and helped her pray for her victim. She also gave her a NT and the first verse she read was 'Come to me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.

'That's me' she said. 'I want to rest. I'm tired of this. If you are real God, prove it.' That night she prayed for forgiveness and went to sleep. The next morning, she woke feeling rested and calm – it was the first proper night's sleep she had had for years.

She joined a bible study group and read the entire NT. She stopped smoking and all her anger disappeared. She had been holding on to so much hurt and fear, but she passed it all over to God. She had been broken, but she knew God loved her and was rebuilding her. And others noticed the change in her too. The prison officers moved her to an open unit in the prison and she started to work in Message Enterprise Centre, a café that does work with ex-offenders. She was flabbergasted that they put their trust in her – it gave her back her sense of self-worth. When she was released, they offered her a full-time job there and she has now restored her family life. "This is God – I give him all the glory."

This testimony reminded me of a local preacher in the Uttoxeter Circuit called Tom

Stanway. He was the chaplain at Sudbury Prison, and he asked our AMC choir and drama group to go in. We went several times and talked with the prisoners afterwards. Some of you were there with me. And when we had finished Tom gave us all a bookmark which had the words 'Prayer changes things' on it. We have seen this morning that we can make changes in our lives, our fate is not inevitable, but that change only comes from faith in Jesus and the power in his name.

I encourage you to continue to follow his example, and also to pray that the change that has been wrought in you might be extended to others who you meet so the kingdom of God may be extended here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Amen

Prayer

Lord, we want to hear from you today a word of forgiveness.....



For us as we disappoint you and fail to do your will. We go our own way and cause hurt to others.

We pray for all those who feel they are not worthy and cannot change their ways.

Lord, we want to hear from you today a word of healing.....

For those who are going through times of trouble, particularly friends and family – for those who are ill, lonely, unemployed, anxious or sad. We name them now in the silence of our hearts.

Lord, we want to hear from you today a word of encouragement.....

For the spiritual health and welfare of our community, our church and our circuit, and the wider locality. We pray for those who lead – for Rev Tim and the leadership stewards - and particularly for our new councillors.

Lord, we want to hear from you today a word of peace.....

Where there is conflict, we pray discussion and diplomacy might overcome war and violence, that darkness may be replaced by light.

Lord, keep us in the joy, the simplicity and the compassionate love of the gospel.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Hymn: The Spirit lives to set us free STF 397

The Spirit lives to set us free,
Walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
Walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.*

Jesus promised life to all,
Walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by his call,
Walk, walk in the light.

He died in pain on Calvary,
Walk, walk in the light.
To save the lost like you and me,
Walk, walk in the light

We know his death was not the end,
Walk, walk in the light.
He gave his Spirit to be our friend,
Walk, walk in the light.

The Spirit lives in you and me,
Walk, walk in the light;
His light will shine for all to see,
Walk, walk in the light.

Blessing

May the God
 who guides us on our journey
The Christ
 who bears our suffering
And the Spirit
 who empowers us with the gifts of life
Fill us with courage,
 wisdom
 and joy.
 Amen

