

Be Like Me

My favourite film has to be Forest Gump.

If you've not seen Forest Gump, it's the story of a man, Forest, Forest Gump who lives in the fictional town of Greenbow, Alabama. Growing up through the 1950's with just his mum to look after him, he gets picked on at school, bullied because he's 'different'. Nowadays we would be tempted to diagnose him with some kind of neurodiversity or autism, but back then he was seen as just a bit weird.

But the thing is about Forest, he sees everything in black and white and that includes what is right and wrong. For all their struggles in trying to make ends meet, his mum taught him good from bad, to make do and be grateful with what comes your way and do the best you can with it.

"Life is like a box of Chocolates; you never know what you're going to get."

And what do you do with what you get? Forest would tell you, "Stupid is as stupid does".

Forest lives life doing what he's told, literally. Even if it's something we might think to be, well, stupid. But for Forest, he finds himself teaching Elvis to dance, reports some strange goings on at the Watergate hotel, becomes a war hero in Vietnam and a millionaire shrimp boat captain, all because he innocently sticks to doing what he knows is right.

He doesn't avoid tragedy, disappointment, doesn't always get what he wants, but, well, you need to see it. It's a wonderful film.

So how do I get from Forest Gump to Daniel?

Well, for me, Daniel is one of those unsung heroes of the bible. The passage we read is the big Daniel story, Daniel in the Lion's den, where the king is tricked into passing a law designed by jealous administrators to trap Daniel, who the king was planning to set over them. And it works, or so they think. Daniel is thrown to the lions. And we know the story; God is with Daniel and the lions fast for the night.

But let's rewind a bit. Daniel was a Jew, living in exile in Babylon. He was basically a slave. He'd lived most of his life there having been taken into captivity probably in his teens. He'd outlived four kings, and although, since first arriving in Babylon, had served in the royal courts as an advisor, he had never forgotten the simple, black and white, right and wrong of who he was.

He was a Hebrew, a servant, first and foremost, of the living God.

Unlike some of the other heroes of scripture, Daniel didn't rout armies, he didn't part seas, heal the sick or raise anyone from the dead.

Daniel's time in Babylon starts when he and some of his friends are chosen to serve the king who will give them the choicest food and train them in the ways of this strange land. But, knowing the food would defile them, Daniel asked the guard to give them vegetables. If after ten days they weren't as healthy as the men eating the posh food, then the guard could do whatever he saw fit. The guard agreed and after ten days, the young Hebrews were stronger and healthier than the others. God was with them.

All the way through the story of Daniel he simply does what he knows is right, what he knows is him. When he's asked to interpret some strange writing on the wall, he does it. When he's asked to interpret a dream, he does it. And he does it well, giving the whole message because, that's what he does.

And I think that's a bit Forest Gump.

In our second reading, it's Joseph who gets the first mention.

"So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock".

Isn't it strange that the first time we hear of Joseph is at the time when you would expect Jesus' closest companions, his friends to be caring for the body of their friend and rabbi. There's a lot that could be said about why, but for now, think about this man Joseph. It says a bit earlier that Joseph is a prominent member of the council and Luke says he was a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision to kill Jesus. Mark says Joseph was waiting for the Kingdom of God and John calls him a secret disciple.

I think Joseph is one of those heroes.

He's a bit like Forrest Gump, having the courage to run back into the battlefield to rescue his injured and dying comrades, despite being told not to.

Simply doing what he knew was right.

Now, if this was a motivational pep talk about having the courage to stand up and be counted, to do the right thing, then Daniel and Joseph kind of work as examples, I guess.

But there's more to this. There has to be more, doesn't there? More than simply doing what is right?

Those who know me will know I am slightly obsessed with the Hebrew word, *Hesed*.

It is an incredible word. It shows up in places like Psalm 136 - Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, His *Hesed* endures forever.

But it's hard to nail down exactly what it means. In English translations of the bible it is translated over 120 different ways, from 'loving kindness', 'mercy', 'loyal love', the list goes on. There isn't a word in English that quite does it.

Someone has called it 'the divine attribute'. I call it the DNA of God's character.

In Matthew 9, when the Pharisees want to know why Jesus hangs out with sinners, Jesus replies, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice", he's quoting Hosea 6, and that mercy in the original Hebrew, is *Hesed*.

It's a bit like Jesus is saying, "I don't want you simply to do the right thing, to tick the right boxes with your sacrifices and rituals. I want you to be like me."

And that might seem like a tall order, after all, Jesus is God. He is the son that is filled with the fullness of God. That's a lot for us to shoot for, right?

But here's the thing. Each one of us is made in God's image, so if we're talking about a divine attribute or the DNA of God's character, it must be right to assume that part of that DNA is already in us. We just need to wake it up.

In the psalm we heard earlier, Psalm 30, *Hesed* doesn't appear. I thought it would be pretty slick if it did, then we could tie all this together nicely. But there is a word that's really closely related to it, *Hasid*.

And *Hasid* is the word used for pious or holy ones. It's translated as saints in verse 4. It describes someone going way beyond the requirements, the box ticking. It is literally someone full of *hesed*. Someone who has realised that there is something bigger, something more within.

As we journey from Easter to Pentecost, we wait expectantly for the promised Holy Spirit. The breath of God that awakens the life that is already within us. Behind the headlines there are Daniels and Josephs quietly being like Jesus and you and me can join them. As Forest Gump would say, "That's all I have to say about that".

As we pray together now, our response is
"Come Holy Spirit and fill us with your love."

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Heavenly Father, as we stand on the threshold of a new week, full of opportunity, promise and challenges, we ask that you would walk with us, lighting our path and giving us the courage and grace to be more like you in every situation.

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Heavenly Father, as we look at our broken world with its wars and divisions, fuelled by fear and hatred of the 'other', we ask that you would help us to be a light in the darkness, knowing how to speak your peace into the world that we live in.

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Heavenly Father, as we hear the stories of those in need, struggling day to day to make ends meet, the homeless, the refugee and the captive, help us to know how to respond to those needs that often seem overwhelming.

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Heavenly Father, as we see the injustices in society that are driven by greed and disregard for each other, help us to have the courage to speak out for the voiceless and to stand up for the oppressed.

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Heavenly Father, as we all feel the pain of sickness and loss, teach us to be those who speak healing, comfort, hope and life into each other's lives and the lives of those around us.

Come Holy Spirit
And fill us with your love.

Amen