What do you have to do to get on the right side of God?

Let’s face it, getting on the right side of God is about the most important thing in life (apart, perhaps from the mother or father in law, the cat …). Getting on the right side of God is about being part of something worthwhile, and it’s also about being part of a story that always has a future. It’s about securing not only our own future, but the future of the world. It’s about eternal life.

So, it’s not surprising that religion has existed throughout the history of the human race as a means of ordering our relationship with God – and therefore each other – for good. In the early days of religion, you might arguably say that it was not obviously seen as there for the good of all people: and some scriptures in our own tradition are dismissive or downright hostile towards those who are not ‘on our side’, so to speak. However, as the tradition moves on through the centuries that scripture represents, it becomes increasingly clear that God is on the side of all.

So here’s the truth about God, as revealed in Jesus Christ: it’s not hard to get on the right side of God, because he doesn’t have a wrong side! God desires nothing more than to draw all people into right relationship with himself, and sent Jesus to open the way for that to be possible. Jesus’ death on the cross cuts to the heart of the brokenness, the darkness and destructiveness of the world, making God’s love and forgiveness, his healing and hope present even in the bleakest of places. All we are invited to do is to turn, and respond – to open our arms, hearts and lives to receive his love.

Oddly enough, this message can be deeply offensive to the human psyche, which wants to be in control, for this is a message which calls for utter dependence, for utter gratitude. Yet this truly is the heart of the Christian faith: that God has done all that is needful to put things right between us and God, us and each other – all we need to do is to receive it, and start to live it out, to make it real in our lives and in the world.

This was a real struggle for the young church in Galatia, which was giving Paul such trouble. He becomes extremely exasperated with them in other parts of the letter, but here he is responding to their reasonable objection to his message, that it sounds as though they can sin with impunity, or that their ‘good works’ are worthless. Far from it, he explains: if you have truly received God’s grace, your lives will reflect that in every way. If you have fallen in love with God, as he has fallen in love with you, your whole life will be built around that singular truth.

We see it, too, in the gospel reading, which also carries deep offence. Imagine if someone were to behave like that at a dinner party at your house, when you were hosting an important and distinguished guest, and had brought in others from your business and church networks to be impressed. There are parallel stories in other gospels, but this one stands alone, with its own powerful image of complete devotion to the love of Jesus, which has set the woman free – free to be herself, free to find her life again, free to love and be loved. The overflowing grace in her passionate response is a model for our own devotion to Jesus.

But it may all seem a bit much. It’s true that the relative formality of a Cathedral may not seem to have much in common with this chaotic outpouring of emotion. My purpose this morning is to seek to warm your hearts as part of our Stewardship programme. So far, I have described the law-bound Galatians, keen to get things right by the book, and having a hard time accepting that all they needed to do was respond to the free gift of grace in Jesus Christ. That
might seem to have some resonance, perhaps. I’ve also described the overabundant excess of the woman weeping over Jesus feet. That will connect with some, though perhaps not with others. Yet there is a third model in today’s readings too: in the closing lines of the gospel reading we read about the women who provided for Jesus and the disciples ‘out of their own resources’. Women of wealth who had become followers of Jesus. Joanna, who has access to the royal court, is mentioned again in Luke 24 as one of the women who went early to the tomb on Easter morning. A new community had come into being made of those who were wealthy and those who were not, those who were blessed with great minds, those who were blessed with great hearts, and those who were blessed with wealth— all of them offering from what they had in grateful response to Jesus.

We are called here to build a new community, in which everyone is welcome; everyone gets to play a part. Rather unusually, the community that we build here in Coventry also has expressions across the world, in the Community of the Cross of Nails— our sisters and brothers who share our particular vocation to work and witness for peace and reconciliation. It’s the same work that has always been taking place in the church: when Jesus says to the woman who was pouring her heart out over his feet, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’, where was she to go? She had been set free from what is presumed to be a sinful lifestyle and income stream: but where was she to find a new home? As one commentary on Luke puts it: ‘What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, “You are welcome here.”’ (It’s the sort of community, by the way, that offers hospitality to the Coventry Pride walk as they set off from the ruins on Saturday, with the message that this is a city which welcomes and embraces diversity, and offers a safe place for those who feel themselves on the edge of a society that doesn’t always understand.)

That community needs resources— it needs the commitment of its members, to make it a welcoming place. And it needs the commitment of practical resources to enable it to function. The Cathedral here, to be the sort of welcoming community which we are seeking to build, needs the commitment of all of us who are members— and we wouldn’t turn down the support of those who aren’t! I had a bright idea last week as I was pouring the accumulated change from a year’s worth of pocket emptying into the coin counter at Sainsbury’s— we have a coin counter in the Cathedral, for which we pay a good deal of money. So can I say to all you men who, like me, have pots and pockets of spare change all over the house: bring it here, and we can count it, sort it, and add it easily to the collection. Just a thought.

What we really need, though— as well as windfall gifts like that, which are always helpful— is a good stream of committed giving. Giving which is the outpouring of our grateful response to God (which I’ve spoken about before) and a response to the needs of the work here, providing out of our own resources. We have some 60 weekly or monthly pledges coming into the Cathedral, some from single people, others from couples— we could do with some more. They vary widely in their amounts, and although I personally do not know who gives what, I do know that they reflect the different circumstances in which our Cathedral members find themselves. We know what we need to balance the budget which we agreed in the Cathedral Chapter for this year: and we know that we are presently significantly behind in the part of that which we count on coming in through our committed stewardship. Our monthly income leaves us behind by around £20,000 on the year— and we only have about 6 months to make that up. £3000 extra is a lot of money to find each month. But God knows what’s needed and what he wants to do, so our role is to play our part, and leave the rest up to him. If we want to know what our part is, as I’ve said before, a good starting point is the tithe: there is a good tradition of God’s people committing the first 10% of their income back to him in thanksgiving. These days, the Church of England recommends half of that— 5%— I’m not quite sure why they decide to cut it in half, but perhaps it makes it a little easier to imagine doing. For myself, I’ve often wanted to split my giving more or less 50/50 between my own church community and other charities with which I have built up a connection over the years. Just at the minute, because of the needs of the Cathedral, I think it’s probably time to shift the balance a bit more towards my church community, which is here with you, with us.

What are you going to do? What part are you able to play in pouring out your own offering of love, or in providing for the work from your own resources? It’s not to earn God’s favour— but it is a response to it. Do look at the forms included in Cathedral Matters today, and if you haven’t yet filled a new one in, may I give you a moment or two now to consider what you might write— and let’s make our fresh offering to God together for his Glory, in this place.

Amen.