

CASHMERE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Sunday 8 March 2020

A privilege to be back here again with you this morning. Thank you for this opportunity once again. I don't think I have anything new to say to you today, but rather, some vital familiar truths to remind you of.

I begin with a confession. If a logophile is a lover of words, then I am an unashamed, unapologetic verbophile, one who loves verbs. Verbs are like mice who run through a story or a passage of Scripture, carrying the action on their backs. In November last year even before I knew about this opportunity to preach today, God gave me four verbs all starting with R for a sermon, that I sensed, could be useful sometime in the near future. I'm going to set these verbs loose to run through this sermon this morning.

GOD'S R VERBS

He **rises**

He **runs**

He **rescues**

He **receives**

I became a Christian around the age of 15. All these mumble-mumble years later I'm still learning new things and at times having to unlearn certain things. Sometimes I use the image of two hands - in one hand we hold the certainties of our faith, the things that we know we know we know. Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. This may be the most profound certainty of our faith, expressed in the simplest of words.

But in the other open hand we hold the mysteries of our faith, the things we cannot fully understand with our minds but simply have to receive with our hearts. As we get older sometimes the mysteries clear a little and we begin to hold them as certainties. And in a similar way, at times the certainties can change and jump into the open hand of mystery. Not that they become weak or untrue but we just have to learn to hold and carry them in a different way.

Wherever we are on the journey of faith, whatever season of life we are in, and whether we hold things as strong solid certainties or as open handed mystery, at times we need to be reminded again of what the Scriptures say about the love that holds us, the forgiveness that enfolds us, the grace that upholds us.

These are the R verbs that God gave me to bring to your attention and your reminding this morning.

First, God **rises** to show us compassion. There's a wonderful verse - Isaiah 30:18 which says: 'The LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion' (v. 18). When I read this verse, I see myself coming into a large room with a huge throne at the far end. There sits God in his greatness and splendour. He sees me as I come in and as I, very small in comparison, walk towards the throne, he slowly, deliberately, watching me all the while, puts his hands on the armrests of his throne and begins to stand. It is a gesture of waiting and anticipation, readiness and welcome.

When I come to prayer, I come with intent - close the door, gather my books, my diary, a pen, light a candle. And God comes with even greater intent. As I sit or kneel, he rises. As I come in weakness, he comes in strength. As I come with confession, he wraps his arms around me in forgiveness. As we come together in prayer, my need and God's great fullness meet.

When we come - God rises.

Second, a familiar story in Luke 15 tells us that God **runs** to shower us with welcome. We see this action played out in the story of the prodigal (that is, wayward) son and his prodigal (that is lavishly extravagant) father who pours out his no-questions-asked love over the boy who has trudged his weary way home.

No man in that society in that day would run. But when this father, this wealthy man of influence and reputation, sees the familiar figure of his younger son heading homewards on the dusty road he gathers up his robes and he runs to welcome him.

Jesus said more than once - If you want to know what the Father is like, then watch what I do. The father in this story is not just a distant Middle Eastern patriarch. He is a picture of the God who is always looking out for us, always waiting, watching and ready to gather up his robes as it were, to run to welcome us back to himself.

When we turn towards God, God runs to welcome us home.

Third, God **rescues** us. Colossians 1:13 says, 'For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

In our Sunday congregation we have a man who told me recently something of his testimony. He had lived for a number of years on the streets of Brisbane, drinking, drugging, living a dying kind of life. Then one day, he said, he just got sick of it. It was as if he woke up from a bad dream. He gave up the drink and drugs and soon after that came back to NZ and began a new life. These days several years on, he gives thanks for his sobriety, for a good job, for a supportive faith community. God has rescued him and I can tell as I look into this man's face that he now has a whole new purpose to his life.

This kind of testimony can be repeated over and over. You will know people with a similar story to tell. It seems that at times God allows us to come to our lowest point and when we wake up as it were, we find that God has been waiting for us all the time.

You may have seen the piece on TV1 on sports news on Tuesday this past week when there was a clip about jujitsu champion Karlo Witana who had a terrible start to life. He was a victim of family violence, crime and drug addiction (his dad gave him P as a teenager). As a baby he more than once had his nappy strip-searched as the police raided their house looking for drugs.

As Karlo grew he took on that whole dark way of life but then as a adult, when his partner told him that she was leaving Karlo and by the way she was pregnant, that lowest point became his turning point. He didn't want his child to live the kind of life he had lived. He stopped drinking and doing drugs and turned round to walk in a whole new direction.

He is now a jujitsu world champion coaching kids to build courage and character. He said, 'It's like something that was a curse has been turned around and flipped upside down, now it's a blessing.'

He says, 'Now I can help people through anything. I can help them through addiction. I can help them through family violence because I've been there myself.'

On the wall of the gym behind where he was being interviewed was Joshua 1:9 in big letters: 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Our lowest point can become our turning point when God intervenes and rescues us and brings us into his kingdom.

Fourth, God *receives* us with mercy, grace and forgiveness.

Titus 3:4 says, 'When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done but because of his mercy. So now we are justified, that is, made right by grace and we are heirs of the hope of eternal life.' And 1 John 1:9: 'If we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'

It seems that no matter how low we sink, how far we fall, how dark the stains of sin in our lives, God's grace can still reach us.

We see this in action in Jesus how he received and welcomed sinners like the woman caught in adultery, or the man who prayed in the temple - 'Lord have mercy on me', or the outcasts like the demon possessed man who lived crazy and incoherent amongst the tombs, or the ones whom society rejected and held at arm's length - those suffering from leprosy. In every encounter in the gospels we see Jesus holding out mercy, offering forgiveness, extending grace.

God's grace reaches out and receives us.

Do you want to know what God is like? Then look at Jesus.

Do you want to know how God speaks? Listen to what Jesus says.
Do you want to know what God does? Then watch how Jesus acts.
And in Jesus we see these wonderful R verbs being lived out.
God rises, God runs, God rescues, God receives us with love and mercy. Notice the movement of these verbs.

In this redeeming work, these wonderful R verbs are all the initiative of God. This is vital to remember. Author Joyce Huggett declared that God is on the inside of every longing we have after him. God is always the initiator, always taking the first step towards us, always the starting point.

Do we want to know God more intimately? God himself is the one who plants that desire in our hearts. Do we decide to get up a bit earlier in the morning to pray? God is the one who draws and woos and invites us to do that. Do we want to get to know the Bible - God's word better? God is the one who places that hunger and thirst in our heart and waits ready to reveal himself to us through his word and to satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts.

God knew us before we were born, he saw us being knit together, as it says in Psalm 139. He knows us, literally, through and through, from the inside out. God had a plan for every one of us from eternity, he saw us down the tunnel of time, he began a good work in each of us and he has promised to complete it, to bring us to a flourishing finish as the Message version has it. God initiates this at every point.

God **rises** to show us compassion. He **runs** to shower us with welcome. He **rescues** us from the grip of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. And he **receives** us with mercy, grace and forgiveness.

We could add other R verbs. God

Restores

Renews

Reconciles

Returns

Remembers

God remembers us as he remembered Noah, adrift on the high seas. After 40 days of rain and 150 days of flood, Genesis chapter 8 begins, 'But God remembered Noah ...

So God remembers us even when we feel cut off, set adrift, wandering in rough places.

These are all strong verbs and they are all part of God's saving initiative in our lives. Thanks be to God.

So how do we **respond** to this saving initiative of God?

How do we **react** when we hear that we are the Beloved of God?

With gratitude or a kind of disbelief and denial - Oh yeah and I'm the King of England.

Do we **rejoice** at God's saving work and celebrate it? In our own lives, in the life of another?

In the booklet of Lenten studies that Silvia prepared, the word for today is Repent. We know that repentance is to do with sin and confession and coming clean and making a new start, turning round and walking in a new direction. But repentance can also be a turning round in attitude, coming to some familiar truth in a new way, having our eyes opened, wiping away the things that have fogged our vision and made us unable to see something clearly.

Repentance today may be a new response to God, a new openness to and acceptance of his unconditional, unfathomable, undeserved, lavish, extravagant, incomprehensible, amazing love.

Realising and receiving the fact that long before we ever turned towards God, God was rising in readiness to run, to rescue and to receive us.

He restores the image of God within us.

He brings recovery to the bruises we suffer and gives us grace to carry the dents and scars that we all experience as we go through life.

He renews our strength like an eagle.

He redeems and transforms the sorrows and struggles we go through by giving us grace to stand with others and say, 'I know something of what you are going through. This is how it was for me.'

This restoring, renewing, redeeming work is all God's doing, all his initiative. All he asks for, all he longs for, is our response. As Henri Nouwen reminds us, when we realise how deeply blessed we are, then we are able to pass blessing on to others.

If that lump of clay
that I am
had known from the beginning
that everything that happened to me
- every storm
- every knock
- every mistake
could be moulded and shaped
formed and fashioned
into a vessel of beauty
I might not have
fought so hard
kicked against it all
questioned and complained
I might have rested more
in the love that promised
to never let me go
I might have received mercy

rather than counting on my achievements

Forgive me, loving God
that I took so long
so long!
to wake up to your presence
that was always watching over me
ready to draw me in
and speak to me of unconditional love
undeserved welcome
and extravagant unfailing amazing grace. Thank you!

Slave-trader turned song-writer and author of *Amazing Grace* John Newton wrote, 'I am not what I dreamed and hoped to be. I have not reached the full potential that others saw in me or that I hoped for myself. But this thing I know - I am not what I was and by God's grace I am what I am.'

May this be where repentance helps us to run to today.
May the arms of God's grace and mercy be the arms that we fall into and find rest in today.
May the God who has always been the one to take the initiative in our salvation journey keep on doing his work, leading and guiding us, blessing us in his way, and bringing us eventually to that flourishing finish that Paul speaks of - Phil 1:6. 'I am confident that he who began a good work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.'
May this be so for all of us today and in the coming days, no matter what they hold.

I encourage you to choose one of these R verbs and put it in your pocket and take it home with you today. Take it out frequently during the coming days, look at it, think about it, thank God for this assurance to you.

I'd love to hear from you as I greet you at the door or over morning tea just which R word you are taking home with you.

And now for a moment of reflection a song with another wonderful R verb.

You raise me up ...

Barbara Sampson