

TRANSFORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF JESUS

→ Changing anything generally takes a lot of effort. Those of you that have given up something for Lent will know all about that. Going without chocolate or Facebook or the television day after day after day, takes a lot of effort and determination. Maybe that's exactly why most of us are much happier when things don't change, because then we don't have to work at it!

.....But for most of us, there are times in our lives when we do want things to change. We fancy a change of direction in our career; we know that we need to take more exercise; we recognise that we need to lose weight, and we know that none of those things will ever happen without us actually doing something about it. The changes won't just happen! Even a caterpillar has to build its own cocoon in order to be transformed into a butterfly!

.....Our God, the God we worship in this place this morning, the God we trust, the God we rely on – well, he's in the life changing, transformation business. That's what he does! He takes people, just like you and me and he renews them, he fixes them, he changes them so that they become more and more like his son Jesus. Remember those words that you heard earlier – “But we know that, when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is.”

.....We will be like him. We will be like Jesus. That is God's goal for your life. He wants you and me to be like Jesus. How amazing! But it won't just happen! If it really is God's purpose for you and me to become more like Jesus, then we can do one of three things. We can fight against it because we don't like the idea of the changes that will involve. We can sit back and just hope that it will happen, or we can work with God in the process of transformation. That's what God wants us to do. That's what we need to do if we are to be changed.

→ But, who is this Jesus that we are to become more like and how does the transformation process happen? Well, hopefully, your experience of working your way through the Essential Jesus reading programme over the last six months will have helped you to grow in your understanding and knowledge of Jesus and also in your love for him. Perhaps, as you have read the bible passages, many of which may have been very familiar to you, you will have noticed new things, gained fresh insights and recognised that perhaps Jesus isn't quite who you thought he was. So who is Jesus for you and how are you going to carry on becoming more like him?

.....Well, first of all perhaps, God uses other people to help transform us and make us more like Jesus! He created us to be people who both need and enjoy relationships so we find ourselves in families and groups and even churches where the people alongside whom we live and work and worship have an influence and an impact on us and some of them help us to draw closer to God and ultimately to become more like Jesus. I imagine that most of us here this morning would be able to talk about one person who has had that kind of impact on us – a home group leader, a parent, a Sunday School teacher, a grandparent, a friend, a spouse or even a total stranger. We would each have a story to tell about someone whose presence in our lives has made a difference to who we are and how we live;

someone who has helped us to understand what Jesus is like and then to become more like him ourselves.

.....God touches people's lives in order that other people's lives might then be touched. That's one of the ways that God uses to transform us. He sends other people our way to influence us. That's why he tells us to encourage one another, to pray for one another, to build one another up, to accept one another – it's all because we can have an influence on one another. Who has influenced you and helped you to be transformed? Give thanks to God for them and then ask yourself, whose life is being transformed because of me; what they see in me, what they hear me say, how they see me respond to people and situations? Remember that passage you read from Luke's gospel where four people brought their friend to Jesus and his life was changed because of their faith and their actions in bringing him to Jesus. God uses people to transform us and he can use us to transform others.

→ Then secondly, God uses circumstances to transform us. You may also remember that during this programme you read a story from John 9 about Jesus healing a man that had been born blind by putting mud on his eyes. But of course, when the neighbours and friends heard about it, they didn't believe it really was him that had changed so much. But the blind man told them, "The man called Jesus put clay on my eyes and now I can see. Note that he called Jesus a man, not a prophet, not the Saviour, not even a healer, but "a man!"

.....So the neighbours then took him to the Pharisees who started questioning the man about how he could be born blind but now see. He told them what Jesus had done and then the Pharisees started arguing amongst themselves about whether healing on the Sabbath was a sin and whether Jesus would have done that if he was a godly man. So then they ask the blind man what he thinks and this time he describes Jesus as a prophet.

.....The Pharisees still aren't convinced so they talk to the man's parents and they confirm that he has been healed. So, they call the blind man a second time and ask about Jesus. He simply declares that he had been blind, but now he sees and then he asks the Pharisees if they also want to be disciples of Jesus. After that he meets with Jesus again and declares his faith in him and worships him. The blind man is transformed from being blind to being able to see, but more than that he is transformed from simply recognising Jesus as a man, to seeing him for who he really is – the Son of God who is able to heal, restore and transform lives and who calls us to follow him.

.....God is in the transformation business. He doesn't cause all the circumstances of our lives to happen – bad stuff can happen to any of us as we were remembering just a few weeks ago – but God can use any circumstance to transform us. Remember what it says in Romans 8 v 28, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose." God can take the circumstances of your life to help transform you into the image of Christ.

→ But remember what I said right at the beginning about us needing to work with God in this process of transformation. Well, this third area that I want to talk

about is where we can do just that. God uses spiritual disciplines to help transform us and that's one great reason for us having embarked upon this Essential Jesus programme. Reading the bible, spending time meditating upon it, talking to and listening to God in prayer – they are all things that God uses to transform us.

.....There's a fairly well known quote from an American football team coach that goes something like this, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted." And there's a sense in which that's what we are called to do. We are called to make ourselves do things that perhaps we wouldn't naturally do or we think we haven't got time to do, in order that we might become what we want to be – more like Jesus! Oh, we want to be like him, but the path to achieving it isn't always easy.

.....So, that means we have a choice. We can run away from it all because it feels too much like hard work, absenting ourselves from the home group meetings or failing to find time each day to pray. We can sit back and just go with the flow and hope that something will happen, watching God at work in other people around and assuming that our turn will come without recognising that those people are working at it, or we can actively spend time, reading, reflecting, meditating, discussing the scriptures with others and praying. And as we do that, as so many of you have been doing through this Essential Jesus programme, we may actually discover that the Jesus we're seeking to become like, isn't the Jesus that the Holy Spirit reveals to us through those spiritual disciplines. We learn more, we discover more and the scales fall from our eyes as they did in the story of the blind man.

.....The more we read God's word and the more time we spend with him, the more we will discover who Jesus is and the more we will become like him if we are open to the Holy Spirit doing his transforming work in us. May each of us be willing to make the effort to work with God to bring about that transformation in us and may each of us continue to know and love Jesus more as we experience his love, forgiveness, healing and grace offered so freely in our lives every day.