

A Romance like no other

Palm Sunday - Mark 15:1-39, (Isaiah 50:1-9)

Introduction

I wonder if you know the fairy-tale story of *Beauty and the Beast*. Ladybird books made it famous, Disney have made their fortunes on it, and the musical theatres have also brought it to life.

Well its one of my daughters favourite stories – the Disney edition has been played countless times in our home, and I've lost count of how many times I've read the story to Ruth over the past two years. But I've got to confess – its one of my favourites too!

I'm sure you know the story – there was a time when his face was handsome and his palace pleasant. But that was before the curse, before the shadows fell on the castle, and before the shadows fell on the heart of the prince. And when the darkness fell, he hid. Secluded in his castle, he was left with an ugly snout and curly tusks – and a foul mood!

But all that changes when a girl comes along. I wonder what would have become of the Beast if the Beauty (Belle in the Disney version) had not appeared? Or better still – if she hadn't cared. You couldn't have blamed her – he was a hairy, drooling, smelly, anti-social, roaring, defying beast.

And she – well: a contagiously kind, stunningly gorgeous, BEAUTY! You couldn't have blamed her for not falling for such a thing – but she did. And because the Beauty loved the Beast, the Beast became more beautiful himself!

It's a familiar story – not just because we've heard it a thousand times before – but because there's a beast within each of us! You say – *Come on Jeremy, isn't that a bit drastic?!*

It hasn't always been so – there was a time in the garden when everything was beautiful, when we lived harmoniously, accepting things the way God had made them. But that was before the curse. Before the shadow fell across the garden – before the shadow fell across the heart of Adam.

And ever since the curse we've been different – beastly, ugly, defiant, angry. Doing things we know we shouldn't do – and we can't figure out why we keep doing them.

The ugly part of me reared his head the other day. I was driving down the M3. Actually let me take a step back. I was out running and came to cross the road. Another runner was waiting to cross at the pedestrian crossing – and stood there incredulous as three cars shot past the crossing without stopping to let her cross. She waved her hand at them and shouted something after them – it didn't sound much like '*Good morning!*' And I thought to myself – come on lady, don't waste your energy on them. It would be nice if they stopped for you – but that's just the

world we live in! You're just filling yourself, AND possibly them too with more resentment and anger!

Ok – back to the M3 – and I'm driving along in the fast lane when someone pulls out ahead of me into my lane. AND he slows down. So there I am sitting behind him thinking a whole host of nasty thoughts about what I'd like to do to his car. I was stuck behind him all the way to the Tokai offramp where we stopped at the lights – I was right behind him (still!) and put up my hands when I thought he may be looking in his rear-view mirror – as if to say – *'Now what was all that about?!'*

I really didn't feel great when pictures of the runner at the pedestrian crossing started pouring into my mind! Conviction surfaced: *'Why did I do that? I'M typically a calm guy – but for those few minutes I was a beast! Only two facts comforted me at that point... (i) I don't have a fish symbol stuck to my car; (ii) the apostle Paul had similar struggles: 'I do not do what I want to do, and I do things which I hate!'* Have you ever felt like saying those words?

If so you're in good company because Paul isn't the only person in the Bible who wrestled with the beast within! It's hard to find a page of scripture where the animal doesn't bare his teeth! If the Bible is called the Good Book – its not because its people are.

A Romance like no other:

Author Max Lucado wrote a book called *'He chose the nails'*. It is sub-headed: *What God did to win your heart*. It describes every part of Jesus' humiliation, suffering, and death as an intentional action of God to win our hearts. You see – written into the pages of Scripture and history is this divine love affair, a romance, like no other – it fills the pages of the Bible from beginning to end. And the greatest focus of the love of God is here displayed as Jesus surrenders himself to anguish, affliction and death. I want to say three things about God's love for you and me:

1. God's love for us is unconditional: *[TELL A LIE:]* Paul says there ***isn't much*** that can separate us from the love of God. NO – doesn't say that at all. He says: *There is NOTHING in all creation – neither height nor depth – angels nor demons – NOTHING...*

At the baptism of Jesus – he hasn't done anything yet – and yet God says: *You are my Son. I'm well pleased. I love you.* He's done nothing yet – and yet the Father says: that's my boy! I love him!

And we get up each morning and look in the mirror – and may think: its not much! And God says: I love him. I love her. That's my boy! That's my girl! And the angels go: *what - that?!*

But we need to hear this with all our heart. That God sees us VERY differently to how we see ourselves! We say – but you don't understand – I

don't look great. My thoughts aren't always great. But Paul reminds us that:
God loved us WHILE we were still sinners!

And so Jesus is a picture of this UNFAILING LOVE OF GOD – He is true beauty epitomised.

And **THE EVIL OF THE BEAST** was never so raw as on that day that Jesus died:

The disciples were fast asleep, and then fast afoot;
The chief priests wanted a show;
And Pilate wanted out! So he questions Jesus, the Son of God. But Jesus does not respond. He has plenty of opportunity to stand up to his false accusers. But he remains silent.

As the prophet Isaiah had foretold... *'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.'* (53:7)

God's love is UNFAILING!

2. God's love is undivided: *"He who did not spare his own son – but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things."* (Rom.8:32) AND *"How great is the love the Father has LAVISHED on us, that we should be called children of God!"* (1 Jn.3:1)

I LOVE marmalade! I really do! And when I put marmalade on my toast in the morning – I really spread it on thick! I mean you'd hardly know there was a piece of toast under it!

And John says here: there's something that you need to know about the love of God – he doesn't love us half-heartedly. He loves us LAVISHLY. He spreads it on thick! Jesus looks at the women caught in adultery. The thief on the cross. You and me. And he loves us LAVISHLY.

And the soldiers – wanted blood! So they scourged Jesus – with the legionnaires whip, consisting of leather straps with lead balls embedded in each end. His goal was to beat the accused to within an inch of his life and then stop (a maximum of 39 lashes, though they seldom needed that many).

You can't blame the soldiers for their first action – they were commanded to flog Jesus; Nor for their third action – they were ordered to crucify him. But it's the second action that's hard to understand: they wanted to have some fun before crucifying him. And so some strong, rested, armed soldiers encircled an exhausted, nearly dead, Galilean carpenter and beat up on him. Who would gain pleasure from spitting on a half dead man?!

Spitting isn't intended to hurt the body – it can't. It is intended to degrade the soul, and it does. What were the soldiers doing? Were they not elevating themselves at the expense of another? THEY felt BIG by making JESUS look SMALL.

Have you ever done that? Perhaps you've never spit at someone, but have you gossiped? Slandered? Have you raised your hand in anger? Or rolled your eyes in arrogance? Have you waived your hands at someone in the car ahead of you? Have you made someone feel bad so that you could feel good?

That's what the soldiers did to Jesus. And when you and I do the same, we do it to Jesus too! *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.'* (Mtt.25:40)

Oh Jeremy – why do you have to ruin a good Palm Sunday celebration? I really don't mean to! But we must face it – that there is something beastly within each one of us – that makes us do things that surprise us. Haven't you ever reflected on something you did and wondered: *"What got into me?!"*

The Bible has a three-letter answer to that question: S-I-N. There's something bad – beastly – within each of us. Isaiah put it like this:

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each one of us has turned to his own way."

Perhaps you disagree with me? Try this challenge: For the next 24 hours lead a sinless life. I'm not asking for a perfect decade, or even a year or a month. Just a day! Can you live without sin for just one day? No? How about one hour? Could you promise that for the next sixty minutes you will have only pure thoughts and actions, worry-free, anger-free, unselfish living?

Can you do it? No? Nor can I! We have a problem.

And while the crowd's beautiful Palm Sunday *'Hosanna's!'* have turned into a beastly hostile *'Crucify Him!'* – God's undivided love for the world he has created – flows deeper and deeper into the cracks of our sinfulness. As Jesus presses on one step after the other – towards the cross.

God's love is UNDIVIDED!

3. God's love is UNFAILING: BUT THERE IS GOOD NEWS! If God is for us – who can be against us! If you do a search of the Psalms for the word 'love' you find another word beside it SO often – UNFAILING. God's love goes on and on and on. There is a lot that wages against us – but God's love for us never fails!

I love the painting of the Prodigal Son – I often think of it: wouldn't that be great! A picture of being cared. Of being held. Of the deep love the Father has for the Son.

So what can we do about this problem of sin in our lives?

Allow the spit of the soldiers to symbolise the filth in our hearts. And then observe what Jesus does with our filth. He carries it to the cross.

Through Isaiah he says: *"I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting."* Mingled with his blood and sweat was the essence of our sin.

God could have had it differently – Jesus was offered a sponge for something to drink. He could have had a towel to wipe his face. But Jesus – who chose the nails, also chose the saliva. Along with the spear and the crown of thorns – he also bore the spit of man.

WHY? Could it be that he sees the beauty within the beast?

God's love is UNFAILING!

Conclusion

Here the analogy of *Beauty and the Beast* must end. For in the story she kisses the beast and he is transformed.

But the story of the Bible goes SO much further! The BEAUTIFUL actually BECOMES the beast – IN ORDER THAT THE BEAST can BECOME BEAUTIFUL.

Jesus changes places with us! *He took the beast to the cross!* In the words of Paul to the Galatians – *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us!"*

Now what would it look like if I was completely head-over-heels, captivated by, in love with God – with just a bit of the passion with which God loves me?

The love of God that draws us to Him – is no slushy, pink cushions, cards and chocolates kind of love. It is a tough, deliberate, intentional, sacrificial love – love that goes the distance – love that would suffer pain, humiliation, death – all in order to win our hearts!

A love that is committed – to God & to my neighbour! A love that's prepared to get its hands dirty. A love that runs deeper than oceans.

The challenge to you and me – is in allowing this incredible story of God's UNCONDITIONAL, UNDIVIDED and UNFAILING love for us – on the world's LONGEST journey: the journey **from the head to the heart.**

God longs that we would spend our LIVES with Him. That we would DESIRE and LONG FOR Him. That we would know the sadness he feels when we ignore Him in our lives. So HOW do we make that journey: HEAD to HEART?!

We need TWO THINGS: a TRUTH encounter & a POWER encounter.

i) **TRUTH ENCOUNTER.** Its like the wrong tapes have been playing over our lives – lies about who we are and who God is. And we need God's truth tape to be played over us.

Look around you – there are NO TWO PEOPLE THE SAME in this church tonight! Because when God made us: he made us uniquely. So often we think: I wish I was more like this person or that person. But when God made the world he looked at it and said: It is good. And when he made you and me – he says: ***Its good. It's very good.***

Bill Hybels, the leader of Willowcreek Church in the States, says that each morning – given what he's been through the day before, or is facing in the coming day, when he wakes up he always reminds himself: *He was a treasured child of the Lord most high.*

This truth needs to be deeply imbibed in our lives – so that when we hear lies about who we are – we can STAND on the TRUTH.

ii) **POWER ENCOUNTER.** Paul says: God pours his love into our hearts by the Spirit. His love explodes into our hearts. The danger for us of God's character – is not that we read too much into it. But that we don't read enough into it.

We dismiss God's judgement because we think – *oh it can't be THAT serious!* We downplay his holiness because we think – *it can't matter THAT much!* We miss out on His love because we think – *it can't be THAT great!*

But God wants us to live in this world with an OVERWHELMING sense that we are loved! And we need to come back to God time and again with a desire: *Lord I really want to get this – I really want to grasp this.* To learn to rely on this. To have this as a foundation for my life.

So we can stand on HIS TRUTH when we walk through life – and things happen to us. AND THEY WILL! ...And here's a list...

Danger will happen to us
Death will happen to us
Hardship will happen to us
Persecution may happen to us
Famine may happen to us
Nakedness will happen to us
Danger may happen to us
Sword may happen to us!

But in all those things – NOTHING can take away this wonderful truth – that God loves us.

Do you ever let God – just love you?