

**SERMON BY IVAN BROWN
GENESIS 28: 10-22 and
CORINTHIANS 2:10-22 and
MATTHEW 5: 1-6
DREAMS AND PRAYERS**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I said earlier that I would return to the subject of dreams and prayers, but first let's look at a short video which may be familiar to many of you... (Susan Boyle video)

Now you weren't expecting that, were you? I refer of course to the sight of Simon Cowell with a smile on his face.

I suspect that most of us really enjoyed that particular happening on Britain's Got Talent. It gives us a warm feeling inside; it makes us feel good. Because we all like to be pleasantly surprised by the unexpected; we all like to see an underdog come out on top, don't we?

It's a sort of David and Goliath feeling of the weak prevailing over the strong. It's the sort of stuff that dreams are made of. It was certainly Susan Boyle's dream to be recognised. She hoped that things would change for her and she certainly achieved that. Whether or not it has turned out for the best only she can say.

But there are things we can learn from that episode. The first is, of course, that we shouldn't judge people by appearances. We should keep an open mind unlike the Pharisees who criticised Jesus' disciples for picking heads of grain on the Sabbath.

The second is that, like Susan, we should have the courage and the faith to take the risk that maybe, just maybe, our dreams could come true and our lives could be changed for the better.

The thing that strikes me is that all of us strive hard to make our lives better. Like Jacob in our Old Testament reading every one of us has or has had dreams: -

- A little boy wants to grow up and be a pilot
- A young woman desires to become a doctor
- Some want to own a new BMW or a piece of land
- Many dream of being involved in a life-changing church
- Others want to feed the hungry or make a difference to someone in need
- Still others want to "make it" in singing or acting or sports or just be successful in life, or raise our children to be successful in life.

One thing we have in common – this I know... every one of us has had dreams.

Norman Vincent Peale, the well-known preacher and author of 'The Power of Positive Thinking' and 'The Positive power of Jesus Christ' among other titles, said "To achieve anything significant, everyone needs a little imagination and a big dream." No matter who we are or what our position in life... in order for us to achieve all God intends for us, we need a dream... in fact, we need a big dream!

Now, I'm not talking about pipedreams or wishes. I'm talking about a compelling vision of what could happen in and through us if God were allowed complete control - that His plan and purpose for our lives would be fully realised.

You see, I believe that deep within us each of us has had the desire for more of life – to do more – to become more – to get the most out of our lives. I believe it's part of our make-up. In the very moment of creation God did what only he can do – he placed within us a little bit of eternity. Ps139 says we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made.' God has placed within each of us a dream and a vision that will take our whole lives and more to fulfil.

Suffice it to say that God has woven within you and me the threads of greatness and significance. We, ordinary people, have been inspired by God with extraordinary dreams. We read it in our passage from 1 Corinthians 2:9 "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"

So, my encouragement is to dream big with huge faith attached to it. Having said that, I don't believe in the Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber song from the musical 'Joseph' which says that 'any dream will do' because that statement is only true if there is no God. But we know that there is a God and with God, any dream won't do. So how are we to know what dream will do? How are we to know what God has prepared for us?

I suggest that this comes only through prayer. Some may say that they prayed for something but it didn't happen. Others may say that their prayers were answered miraculously. So we might ask 'Does God answer prayer sometimes but not always? Does God always answer prayer but sometimes says 'No'?'

For the answer we must think back to what God did in the creation poem in Genesis. In it God creates, but he creates things that are capable of creating more. He creates trees but gives trees the ability to create more; he creates animals and plants and fish but then empowers them to create more; and God creates people and gives people the ability to create more.

So everything in creation is essentially unfinished. God leaves the world unfinished and invites us to take part in the ongoing creation of the world. Now, when we create we run the risk that what we created may not turn out the way we wanted it to; it may go in an unexpected direction; it may not be everything we intended it to be; it may veer off course and it may break our heart. So this divine creative energy takes great risk but it works in a way that brings order out of chaos.

You see in the Genesis poem God began the endless process of bringing design and order and beauty and when we pray we can be tapping into this divine creative energy that made everything.

And so prayer is not the passive acceptance of just 'this is how it's going to be'; nor is it the sort of prayer that Jacob used in our Old Testament reading – 'if you do this for me, God, I'll do that for you'. Prayer is being open to the God who is at work here and now.

And to be open to God means being totally honest with him – brutally honest as seen in many of the psalms. God can handle what we're thinking. God can handle how we're feeling. God can handle what we're saying. Prayer is truth; it is being honest with our maker.

When Jesus prayed to his Father it wasn't just honesty that was going on. Jesus always assumed that he was going to be involved in some way in the answer; that there was some role for him to play in this creative, ongoing work of God. You see, some people praying take the attitude that 'God didn't answer my prayer', but perhaps they were the answer. Perhaps they had to fulfil their role. Perhaps, on occasions, God simply creates the circumstances in which we can find the answer for ourselves.

Somebody who believes that the God who created the universe is at work here and now; somebody who is open to that; somebody who's looking for the role they are to play in the ongoing creation of the world is going to tap into that divine creative energy.

Prayer isn't just a formality, or some sort of list, or some sort of ritual that we have to go through so that we can get on with our day. Prayer is our whole posture towards life; it's way more than just words; it's the whole way that we see everything that is going on around us.

Prayer is being still, it's meditating, it's reflecting, it's listening, it's waking up and it's when we never stop asking the question 'what is God up to right here and now and how can I be a part of it?' Praying changes things, but prayer changes us. Prayer makes us better people.

That is when we perceive that prayers are answered. That is when dreams come true. That is when lives are changed.

One final learning from our beginning video. Susan sang the words,

"I dreamed that love would never die, I dreamed that God would be forgiving"

These dreams, we know through faith, have come true through Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross; and they always will.

As we read in our Gospel passage, Jesus said 'Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven... You are the light of the world... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.'

Yes, true prayer changes lives, changes us and if we need any further proof I'd like to introduce you to some people that I met a while ago in Willow Creek...(video)

So, let us aim to spend a lot more than two weeks of our lives in prayer and let's never stop asking the question 'what is God up to right here and now and how can I be a part of it?'

Let's pray.

God of life and love, hear our prayer. Guide us, we pray, to be always listening; listening for the answer to what you wish for us and from us right now; Show us how we can be a part of your ongoing work wherever we are, in church, at home, at work, at play. Guide us always to be conscious of what you would have us do and equip us, we pray, to do your bidding. Be with us as, apart from you, we are nothing. We ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.