

Blessed are Those Whose Help Is in the Lord

Mark 7:24-37

As I was preparing for this morning, I walked around the church a little bit just to familiarize myself with what might be around. Foyers are always a good place to work out what the church or the congregation might be about. An even better place to see what the congregation might be about is the noticeboard. Noticeboards are very revealing -- this comes from years of working in the District office and going into all different congregations.

Most noticeboards in most congregations are full of notices offering help or asking for help. It's all about help. Most of what's going on is about helping. As I was preparing for this sermon, helping seems to be everywhere. If you ever watch daytime television, and you get onto the shopping programs, it's all about help. They're going to help you with a problem that you didn't even know you had! You listen to most of our politicians: they're there to help. They don't want anything from you -- "We're here to help."

In the middle of the day on a Sunday, you're out the back pruning, and the front doorbell goes. Around you go, and all of a sudden there's someone there in a suit, and a very smartly-dressed woman with him. And they have magazines with them. And they want to help. No thanks, got all the help I need here.

Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Our help is in the name of the Lord.

What does God do to help us? What is it that he's on about? Something bad happens in your family and all the rest of it, and someone will tap you on the arm and say, "Oh, God will help." Will he? Maybe if he'd been God, maybe he would have been there before what happened happened, and stopped it so that I don't need the help. A bit of pro-action might have been worthwhile, rather than reaction. Hello! Is anyone there?

Later on today in our service, I will conduct a Rite of Memoriam for Dr David Stoltz. In my time in the District Office, which was from 2000 to halfway through 2005, I got extremely close to David. Very close. He was, without a doubt, one of the wisest, most articulate, genuine, generous, wonderful people that I have ever met. And at one stage David sat down with me and we had a long conversation in my early days when I was doing to Pastor for Congregational Support (which Brett Kennett is now doing). And he explained to me and showed me how different levels on a continuum of dependency works (this was part of the work that he had done to get his doctorate); and I found it fascinating and extraordinarily helpful.

It was all about the way that we interact. So let me ask that question again: how does God help us?

What I'd like to do is take us on a little journey here. If we look at the way that families function, that parents and children function, and then we take that across and look at how we function with God (because after all, we call God Father), then I think we'll get a handle on some of the things that we need to think about.

I taught parenting for about 8 years in a school in Mildura, and I remember that when I started to do the teaching, one of the staff members who thought she was extraordinarily funny said to me, "Have you heard the old adage that those who can, do, and those who can't, teach?" Thank you.

It begins with dependency. It begins with an individual within a family being dependent. Now when we first have children, when they first come along, they are dependent, utterly dependent. There's nothing they can do without our help. Completely and absolutely dependent.

What about when we first become children of God? We are utterly dependent. We don't know chalk from clay. We have no idea what's going on. We are utterly dependent. And so, as the nurture takes place, and as we learn more about what the relationship is, we begin to grow. And hopefully we become more mature! Maturity is absolutely central to this; and as we grow into this particular faith that we are now in, there is a danger that we can enter into a relationship which is on our part dependent, and on God's part co-dependent.

Have you ever noticed that there are some people within the faith who try to make God co-dependent on them? They try to make God do the things that they want him to do, in order that they don't feel so scared any more. Their dependency drives them to try and make God co-dependent on them, so that somehow God has an identity because he's helping me all the time. And it can sometimes be seen in very, very deep piety. Piety that can sometimes be overrun by this need to have God provide me with everything that I want (not everything that I need).

See, part of growing up in maturity is for you to start taking responsibility for your life; responsibility for the things that you do; responsibility for the decisions that you make. You can't continually and always place all of this stuff back onto God. If you continually forge forward in a particular line of behaviour which is not in your best interests, and you constantly run to God seeking forgiveness, you are trying to make him co-dependent. You are trying to make his existence necessary because of you (instead of the other way around).

And then as we grow within a family (and this becomes very, very difficult for parents), we go into the area which is known as counter-dependence.

Counter-dependence. "You are to be home at 9 o'clock. That's the time you come home."

"What about 10 o'clock?"

"No, no I said 9 o'clock. If I had meant 10, I would have said 10."

"Well, Jenny's mum lets her stay out till 10."

"Yeah, well that's Jenny's mum. That's not me."

"But it's only an hour."

And then we come with the statement that beats all arguments. You know what it is, don't you?

"Well, you come home at 9 because I said so and I'm your father."

Counter-dependency also begins to show itself as we move further forward into our Christian life, and it starts to become inconvenient, or it becomes difficult, or we start to enter into things that we're really unsure about, we're not sure whether we should be involved in this. Now, this takes maturity. To live the Christian life, it's necessary to be mature, and to walk into things, not to hang back and say, "I'm not really sure on this, I'm not really sure what's going on." OK, that's all very well and good, but the only way that you'll find out is if you go forward. It's risky, it's dangerous, it can be scary, you may very well have other people in the faith "tch tch" about what you are doing. But you are being called to be mature. Not to constantly look for God to get you out of every little hiccup that comes along, or wait for him to somehow open the skies and give you a clear

indication of everything that you have to do every minute of the day. It's time for maturity, to move forward.

And as we moved forward in the family, it seems that most parents want their children to be independent. But that's only a step along the way. You see, does God want us to be independent? I don't think he does. That's not the way I see it in Scripture, to be independent, to stand alone, to stand in and of myself. No, there is a next move in this continuum.

And that next stage is inter-dependence. Inter-dependence. To stand with, alongside someone else; to be involved; to have an intrinsic relationship. We are involved with God in an inter-dependent relationship. An inter-dependent relationship where we are involved together.

People say "God is with me all the time." Well, yes he is, but think it through. Do you really want him there all the time? Do you really want him there, looking, all the time? Do you really want him there looking to the very depths of your being, all the time? Because if that's our understanding of God, then that's what he does. And so we act in an inter-dependent way.

This is risky stuff, my friends. The Christian faith calls for maturity, it calls for integrity, it calls you to walk in directions that you don't want to go and to be involved in things which can be quite scary. That's how God helps us! God helps us by turning around and saying, "You know what? It's time for you to take a walk. It's time for you to go out there, it's time for you to go out in the messy stuff, it's time for you to go out and to be confronted with views that are not your own. For people to say to you, "What's this Christianity all about? What's this faith all about?" For people to give you a copy of Richard Dawkins' latest book, and say, "You really should read this." This is what it is when God helps us.

God helps us by taking us from being children and turning us into mature adults. Because once he turns us into mature adults, you know what? You then become a helper. If you remain a child in the faith all your life, if you remain in that way where you are constantly looking for God to give you everything that you need at every moment, and you're not willing to take the risk, then you will remain a child. But you won't be able to provide the help that so many others around you need. And you won't understand and appreciate what God's help is for you.

How many of you want your children to be mature, to stop being children? "Well, you're my baby, of course you are, you never won't be my baby..." But you know what I mean, don't you? To step out in that particular way -- that, I would suggest to you, is how God helps us.

He calls us into a life which is dangerous and risky. One where, so often, we would like to withdraw for a while. We come into this place to withdraw. But you know what? We don't stay here. We leave, and we go back out into it again. And hopefully we go back into it as more mature people, stronger, a little bit more courageous, a little bit wiser, a little bit more compassionate because we realize that everybody out there is struggling the same as I am. I'm not Robinson Crusoe in this world, and I don't live on an island.

And so my friends, that's how God helps us. He helps us by calling us to get out there, and to be involved as adults; to engage with him in an inter-dependent way; to engage with the world in an inter-dependent way; to get our hands dirty; to hear the things that we might not want to hear.

There is a danger within the Christian church which is rising all the time, that the Christian church is trying to manipulate the world around it, in order to protect itself from that very same world. That will not make us mature, and that will not be the help that we need from God.

And so my friends, be bold. Do not fear, for your God is here. Go out and be of good faith, in Jesus' name. Amen.