

I will sing the wondrous story  
Of the Christ who died for me;  
How He left the realms of glory  
For the cross of Calvary.  
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story  
Of the Christ who died for me,  
Sing it with the saints in glory,  
Gathered by the crystal sea.

I was lost, but Jesus found me,  
Found the sheep that went astray,  
Raised me up and gently led me  
Back into the narrow way.  
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story  
Of the Christ who died for me,  
Sing it with the saints in glory,  
Gathered by the crystal sea.

He will keep me till the river  
Rolls its waters at my feet;  
Then at last He'll bring me over  
Saved by grace and mystery  
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story  
Of the Christ who died for me,  
Sing it with the saints in glory,  
Gathered by the crystal sea.

We continue our series looking at the core values that we aspire to as a church. This week we're looking at the concept of us being a church that is **relevant and connected**. For many people today church is seen as completely irrelevant and disconnected from everyday life.



Father God, thank you that your grace and mercy are new and fresh everyday. Help us to plug into your grace and mercy again today. You Word says that you are the vine and we are the branches; Help us to remain in you and to experience your characteristics and compassion flowing through our lives as we become more deeply connected to you. We ask that you would bless all the people connected to our church, and the other churches in the town. As we grow in our relationship with you, would you increase our capacity to impact the Croftlands Estate with your love. We pray especially for George in hospital today, may he know your peace and soon feel better.

We pray in Jesus name. Amen



When we think about the demands, struggles and aspirations of everyday modern life, how is taking out time in your week to focus on and worship an obscure Jewish man who lived 2000 years ago, with a group of random people in any way beneficial?

For many people, the response may be.... it's a complete waste of time!

But, pause for a just a moment to focus on the enormous impact of that obscure Jewish man; the things he said and did, and before long you find that his wisdom, values and actions have massive relevance to every aspect of our lives.

The Jewish man I am referring to is of course, Jesus Christ and within his short time of public ministry he introduced a kingdom that has spread across the whole world, The Kingdom of God. The Historian H G Wells says, **“The test of an individual’s greatness is; What did he leave to grow? Did he start men thinking along fresh lines with a vigour that persisted after him? By this standard Jesus stands first”**

You can gauge the size of a ship that has passed out of sight by the huge wake it leaves behind. Jesus visit to earth 2000 years ago is still making waves today and nobody has embodied the saying that “Actions speak louder than words” than him.



### **How was Jesus relevant in his time and culture?**

He was born into a Jewish culture when Israel was under Roman occupation. He grew up embracing the traditions of that culture within his family and community, and so when he began his ministry he was able to teach and preach with utter relevance, yet at the same time always challenging the social norms of his culture in order to connect people with God and his Kingdom.

In the parable of The Prodigal Son –which we read later –Jesus is challenging his listeners with a story which on one hand was relevant, and yet on another would have been utterly shocking to them. According to the guidelines of the culture, the Father had every right to turn away his son and treat him harshly, yet here is Jesus portraying God as The Father who welcomes home the undeserving. Not only that, the Father runs towards his son, so great is his joy at seeing his son return home. For an important, socially respectable patriarch to run in public was unthinkable according to the social norms. It was undignified!



**11** Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. **12** The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

**13** "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. **14** After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. **16** He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

**17** "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18** I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' **20** So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

**21** "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

**22** "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23** Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. **24** For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

**25** "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. **27** 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

**28** "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. **29** But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

**31** " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "



The relevance of his many parables enables Jesus to connect with his culture and teach on topics such as; Money, possessions, security, health, employment, relationships and he frequently improved peoples living conditions leaving them healed, forgiven and valued.

We find in this parable of The prodigal son issues as relevant today as the day it was told, that are spot-on in the way they connect with our lives and our modern culture. Here are some of the life issues it reveals, issues so current that they will fill the pages in tomorrows news papers!

- Selfish ambition,
- Sibling rivalry
- Money issues and care free living
- Inappropriate sexual activity
- Impatience
- Hopelessness, desperation and hope
- Duty and honour
- Hatred, bitterness and envy
- Repentance and forgiveness
- Love, grace and celebration
- Restoration and justice
- The gift of free choice
- Our desperate need of a loving father



**So why when we have this incredible “God Man” at the centre of our faith does church today sometimes seem so irrelevant to everyday life and disconnected from the people around us?**

The ways in which church is relevant has changed dramatically in the last 25 years. Our culture has changed, so much so that churches lose credibility if we don't change to make ourselves relevant to it. If we are not relevant, then we cannot be connected to our communities and the gospel of Jesus remains hidden behind the inaccessible walls of the traditions and expectations of a bygone age.

The challenge we face is to be able to be relevant and connected with our culture without changing the gospel.

Jesus's message and teaching are of relevance to all human beings throughout every generation, regardless of what time period or culture we are living in. The relevance doesn't change, but the way we connect constantly needs to change.

### **Why are churches so often perceived as irrelevant?**

Because so often we have failed to change the way that we connect. The changes in our culture have stealthily crept up on us so fast that often we are left reeling, at a loss to know how to connect with a culture that is so different



from what we knew. In today's fast-paced, digital culture, people expect instantaneous access to what is going on around them, multiple options and choices to fit around work, travel, kids sport, and leisure, all of which means that traditional church available just on Sunday no longer connects with people. Are people less committed? Not necessarily - the times have changed. Those outside of church look at us to see what we are doing to make a difference in terms of the big issues affecting our society. People don't want to see biblical brilliance or polished theology. They want to know if we believe what we say, enough to truly live it.

The question that matters to us as a church is ... **are we sharing the message in a way that is relevant and engaging to our current culture?**

Recently, Kathryn and I have come to think of our church's ministry into the community as a project, which we like to call 'Connecting Croftlands'; connecting people with God, connecting with each other, connecting with our community, and connecting those in our community with each other.



This project was under way long before we joined you 4 years ago through the toddler group, community lunches, youth activities, relationships with the local schools and so on. Those ministries have continued to grow and adapt over recent years as we attempt to strengthen and develop those connections into our community and evaluate their relevance.

Going forward we face increased challenges to become *more* relevant, *more* connected as we seek to share the gospel in a way that speaks to our everyday lives, as Jesus did. During Covid, we have faced considerable challenge, and the move to put our services on-line has been a relevant way to connect as a church and into the community. Post covid, there will be further challenges as we meet again, and our online connection needs to remain an option for others in the community to connect with us. Our prayer is that - as Sally-Ann talked about last week, - people will connect with us as part of the family of God, and in so doing will find that personal connection with God as their Father for themselves.

We constantly need to change the way that we connect in order to make the message of Jesus relevant and that is the exciting challenge that we face going forward. We are excited about developing the 'Connecting Croftlands' project as we go forward and as we welcome others to come alongside us in that. Please continue to pray that God will open doors for Bradley to join us, and others that God may be calling to join us in this challenge of being relevant and connected.

These twin concepts of 'relevance and connected' go hand in hand and work in either order. We have seen from Jesus himself that he was able to connect with people because he was relevant, but equally, he was relevant because he was connected. **"I and the Father are one" John 10:30**

I'd like to finish by looking briefly at the importance of us as individuals and as a church being first and foremost connected to God, and this is the key to everything. Everything else flows out of our connection with God. In **John 15:5** Jesus describes the importance of this connection by using the picture of a vine.

**"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing".**

In John 5:19, Jesus speaking of himself says.....

**"...the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."**



It's so important to remember that if we are dis-connected from God, then we are incapable of bearing the fruit that demonstrates the gospel as of any relevance in our community. Just as Jesus constantly spent time remaining connected with his father in order to accurately portray God throughout every aspect of his connections with people, so we need to remain in relationship with God, so that as we play a part in 'Connecting Croftlands', our faith in God will be real and alive, relevant and meaningful, demonstrating the heart of God The Father who joyfully welcomes each prodigal home and runs towards them with arms outstretched.

If we are not connected to God our Heavenly Father, then that dis-connect in our lives will take us on a search for connection and satisfaction in other places that eventually leave us on the scrap heap of life, just like the prodigal son. For a while those connections in his life through ambition, a fast life style and inappropriate sexual expression brought him an initial sense of inner connectedness with himself, but as time went by, that route left him with despair and a sense of hopelessness.

**What is that dis-connect that exists in the heart of every human being?**

It is the awful result of what happened at The Fall in the Garden of Eden when human beings became dis-connected from the glory of God, and in turn dis-connected from their true identity. Before the fall, we were the most glorious beings, but we've lost it....

## **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans 3:23.**

At the heart of each one of us is a quest to re-connect with that illusive thing that we somehow know is missing, the glory of God. The problem is, we don't know where to find it and so we are left wide open to all kinds of suggestions from our culture, the lies of the devil and temptation, taking us even further away from our glorious identity in God. We see a glimpse of that ultimate restored glory in the life of Moses and Elijah when they appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

**How can we re-connect with God and find that missing glory that we ache for?**

Jesus is the way to re-connect with God. **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me". John 14:6**



It was sin that dis-connected us from God in the first place, and severed the relationship we had with him in ways that we cannot fix from our side. However good we may be, none of us are perfect, and as a result we are spiritually dead, unable to connect with God outside of Jesus.

Jesus longs for us to be back in that glory. In John 17:24, he prays **"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.**

When we come to Jesus honestly and ask him to re-connect us with God, the most amazing transaction occurs..... He takes away completely all of our sin and just like the father in our reading, he takes away the metaphorical dirty, ragged clothes and replaces them with a robe on our shoulders and a ring on our fingers.

Jesus clothes you in his perfection. He is now the link connecting you with God. He pours his grace and kindness into your dis-connect, your brokenness and your questions and he invites you to walk with him again, to talk to him directly, to give him your anxiety. He invites you to open your heart to him and trust him in order that you might experience his tenderness, and his power as he begins the process of aligning your life with who he designed you to be in the first place. He wants you to be the *you* that he planned and created, not defined by stereotypes, or culture or the voice of the enemy, but a son or daughter of God, pursuing the life he intended for you, so that his glory might be displayed in you until that day when, like Moses and Elijah you too will be fully restored into the glory of God.

Re-connecting with the glory of God is the most important connection we will ever make. In re-connecting with God, we are re-connecting the eternal with the everyday and that is where we will find true relevance for ourselves and as a church.

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of  
The Holy Spirit be with us all, now and ever more. Amen.**