**Psalm 141**

**Kind living: our highest calling**

Generally speaking, I think that we live in a beautiful world, filled with beautiful people who do beautiful things. Good far outweighs bad in our world and we need to hold onto that. But we know that the impact of negativity, the consequences of negativity far outweigh the size of its presence.

This week, I hurt my foot – I won’t bore you with the story how! But I have a problem with a small part of my right foot and the impact of that on my body far outweighs the physical size of the injury. I’m walking with a bit of a limp at the moment and that is now hurting my hip and I am not able to sleep too well at night, which is making me even more grumpy than I usually am, and that’s having a knock-on effect with some of my relationships.

A small injury, a small piece of negativity in my body is having far-reaching consequences.

And so it is in the world in which we live: a beautiful world, full of beautiful people doing beautiful things, but where there is negativity or evil that can have a huge impact that far outweighs the size of its presence. And we are seeing that in so many ways in our country at the moment…

There is a political debate going on about Brexit – as if you didn’t know that already! But the debate is one in which, now, people are calling those who hold other views the most terrible names: “Traitor” “Betrayer” “Delusional” “Selfish”. When did it become OK to talk to other people like that, just because they hold a different political opinion? When did it become OK to throw milkshakes over politicians? When did it become OK to threaten MPs with rape and murder because they are following their consciences on a particular issue?

How have we got to this?

And we see the huge impact of little evils in our social media too: the most nasty, unkind things being written in Facebook posts; people being humiliated and slandered and cyber-bullied even to the point where some are taking their own lives.

How have we got to this?

When did it become the social norm for such unkindnesses to be just the way we do things?

If the world needs anything right now, it needs kindness.

If the church has anything to offer the world, it must surely be a movement, a community, of kindness where we say kind things, and we act kindly to one another, and we do kind things in the wider community.

Kindness – the world is crying out for it…

I guess that has always been the case, but it seems amplified in this 24-hour news culture, this social media culture in which we can be absolved of ethical responsibilities, because we are firing shots from the safety of a keyboard and screen.

We know it’s always been the case and, in the Psalm we are thinking about this morning, Psalm 141, it was the experience of David, who wrote the Psalm, that he was on the receiving end of deep unkindness from others and he wrote this Psalm trying to work out how to deal with that. David recognized the unkindness in the nation and he knew that, as a follower of God, he had to find a way to live in that society without succumbing to the unkind words and behaviours that he saw all around him.

And for us as Christians, we are in the same position: how do we live and act in a world that, at times, is deeply unkind, without falling into the trap of being like that ourselves? How do we, as Christians, stick to our convictions about how to live for God in an age where there is so much pressure on us to engage with the tensions and the conflicts and the unkindnesses of the world?

Because unkindess has become normalized: it’s a part of our social fabric now. And is deemed to be acceptable in the realms of politics and social interaction. And bizarrely, to seek the way of kindness is seen by many as an odd thing to do.

But as Christians, kindness has to be the norm: it has to underpin all that we say and do as individuals and as a church.

So how do we live kindly? How do we prepare ourselves to be kind people? Well, that’s what this Psalm, fundamentally, is all about…

Well, there are four things to draw out of this Psalm in this regard:

**1. Kindness springs from a right relationship with God**

In verses 1 and 2 of the Psalm, David writes this: “I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me;

give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

David was aware of the problems in the nation and he was determined not to become a party to all that unkindness. And he knew that the foundation for keeping himself separate from that was to be in a right and prayerful relationship with God. David knew, as we all know, that we don’t have the strength within ourselves to avoid the temptation of going with the crowd and he needed God’s strength to help him.

It happens with me, and I’m sure with all of us, that we might be sitting with a group of friends enjoying a glass of wine or something and the conversation begins to turn a little bit unkind; we might start to criticize someone or a bit of gossip might start going around and we know that the right thing to do is to say: “Hey guys, this is not really appropriate, is it? Can we change the conversation?” But it’s hard to do that. It’s hard to go against the flow and stand up for what is right.

David knew that when he wrote this Psalm and so he asks God to change his heart so that he becomes more prayerful and more aware of living in God’s presence so that he becomes more inclined to do the right thing when it is needed. “I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

If we want to have a kind and gentle relationship with the world, we need first to have a worshipful relationship with God; to have God at the centre of all our thoughts and actions so that then radiates outwards in how we interact with other people.

A relationship with Jesus Christ is how we experience true love shown towards us, and that experience of love then transforms how we respond to others: if God has loved us so much to share his Son with us, then we become more convinced that we need to share love with others.

To love our enemies: not in our own strength but in the strength that God gives.

To forgive those who hurt us: not in our own strength but in the strength that God gives.

To bring healing where there is hurt: not in our own strength but in the strength that God gives.

The strength of God at work in us, as we learn to rely more and more on him, transforms how we interact with the world and increases a spirit of kindness within us.

And so, moving on to our second point from this Psalm, that desire to serve God and to show kindness impacts what we say and how we behave.

**2. An ethical change within us towards kindness**

In verses 3 & 4, David writes this: “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not turn my heart to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with those who work iniquity; do not let me eat of their delicacies.”

“Set a guard over my mouth”.

“Do not turn my heart to any evil”.

It we want to show kindness in a world that can be a very unkind place, we need to ask God to guard our mouths and our hearts.

And it’s interesting that David prioritises our speech here. Now, the Bible has a lot to say about our speech because we know that words can utterly destroy people, words can utterly destroy communities. Gossip, slander, lies, criticism, spreading rumours…these are absolutely not the types of behavior that are acceptable before God and they are absolutely not acceptable in the church.

We must not gossip about one another. We must not talk about one another behind our backs. We must not criticize people or judge them: it’s completely unacceptable to do that because it destroys lives, it destroys families, it can destroy the community.

“Set a guard over my mouth”.

“Do not turn my heart to any evil”.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ that we are called to live and proclaim is a Gospel of soothing words; loving words, kind words, encouraging words. It is a denial of the Gospel to act any other way. We are called to build one another up, not tear one another down: that is not the way of Christ. We should speak only words that heal and encourage. We should build a protective and safe environment with our words, not a place where people feel judged or vulnerable.

We must learn to use words wisely.

And that brings us on to the third point from this Psalm, which is to say that correction is different from judgment and that, in our words, we may be called to correct someone but from a position of love and kindness and encouragement.

**3. Building one another up through correction**

In verse 5, David writes this: “Let the righteous strike me, let the faithful correct me”.

Now this is hard for us all to hear because we don’t like to be corrected, do we? But the ability to receive correction, which is very different from judgment, is very important.

The first time I worked in India was in 1992 and I was there for nearly four months, working in some of the most trying conditions of poverty and disease that I have ever encountered. It was a massive culture shock for me working in the slums of Delhi and I was traumatized and angry about what I was seeing and I didn’t handle it well at all. And one day, after I had been there a couple of months, a Christian we were working with took me to one side and said, “You know Steve, since you have arrived, I haven’t heard you say a single positive thing about anything. You need to change the way you see things and change the way you are talking.”

And I was so angry that he dared have a go at me about that!

But, you know, he was right to do it. He wasn’t criticizing me, he wasn’t judging me. He was just gently trying to correct my behavior and build me up as a Christian and a human being. It was hard for me to hear – but he was right to do it, and it took courage on his part.

We cannot grow as Christians unless we are willing to be corrected. It is tough – none of us like to go through that experience. But it is necessary for our growth in faith.

In the letter to the Hebrews, in the New Testament it says this: “Let us spur one another on towards love and good deeds”. And part of that spurring on is to correct one another in love. We are all broken people and we all need correcting. But it takes wisdom and courage to engage in that process.

As a church and a nation, we seem to have lost the art of kind correction and replaced it with judgmentalism.

Correction is a kindness: it helps to edify and build character.

Now, when we seek to correct someone, we need wisdom and discernment. Correction has to come from prayer and a sense that this is God’s word to someone, otherwise it’s just us getting something off our chest. If you come up to me after the service today and say, “Steve, your sermons are a bit long, aren’t they?” that’s more likely to be you offering a personal opinion than an edifying correction. But if you go away and pray about it for some time and then come back and say, “Steve, thanks for your preaching ministry and the hard work you put into your sermons. How can we best support you to improve your sermons so that they become more useful for the community?”…then that begins to look a bit more like a kind and edifying correction!

Correction is not judgment. Correction seeks to build up and edify, not destroy or humiliate or embarrass…

So kindness comes out of a right and prayerful relationship with God.

Kindness is worked out through how we speak and act.

Kindness is built up through prayerful correction.

And finally and briefly…

**4. Kindness has a long-term impact**

In verses 5 & 6, David writes this: “…my prayer is continuallyagainst…wicked deeds. When they are given over to those who shall condemn them, then they shall learn that my words were pleasant.”

Wickedness shall not prevail in our world. Evil shall not triumph in our world. At some point, all of that will come under God’s judgment and, as David writes here, “then they shall learn that my words were pleasant”.

As Christians, we need to set ourselves apart from the unkindnesses of this world and speak only words of kindness, undertake only acts of kindness and, one day, that will be vindicated and the power of kindness will triumph over everything else.

“Then they shall learn that my words were pleasant”.

Kindness and love shall prevail and we want to be part of a movement of kindness, a movement of love; a movement that will have a transformative impact on this community and the wider world.

So be kind.

Love one another.

Say only kind words.

Do only kind things.

In that way, we will be honouring God in how we live our lives and we will be reflecting God to a world that is in such a deep need for him. This is such a beautiful world, with such beautiful people doing such beautiful things. Let’s align ourselves with beauty and goodness and kindness. Let’s stand against the negativity that so often mars the beauty through unkind speech and actions. Let’s build one another up with kindness and love.

And may St. Andrew’s be known, above all else, as a counter-cultural community of kindness where everyone is accepted, everyone is loved for who they are and everyone goes away from here feeling better about themselves more loved, more lovable, than they felt when they came in.

St. Andrew’s Church: a community of kindness.

That’s not a bad aspiration for us as a Mission-Shaped Church.