

# FOUR RELATIONSHIPS

*Jesus came to bring us life – “life in all its fullness.” This full life is all about relationships, much more than things or achievements, skills or experiences. We have 4 vital relationships – with God, with our Self, with Each other, and with our World – and Jesus wants to revitalise and transform each of them. The central cross reminds us that Jesus, who loves us and all people to the point of death on the cross, is our centre, our leader, our beginning and our goal.*

Following Jesus means something revolutionary. We move from being the centre of our own lives to obeying Jesus, and making him the centre of our life's journey. Following Jesus is about a relationship with God who loves us and welcomes us with arms wide open. Relationships are more important to God than anything else. They are his very nature. In some mysterious way, God has always been in relationship, an eternal, loving community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So it makes sense that as we follow Jesus, relationships will become more important to us. Moreover – hold on tight! – following Jesus will transform every relationship that we experience.

We are all involved in four different kinds of relationships – with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the world. We call them vital relationships, because they are about life and vitality. God created the world and everything in it, and that creation is good (Genesis 1). The first family were in direct relationship with God. They knew themselves only as God knew them. They loved and served each other, and enjoyed a mutually sustaining relationship with the world around them. Then they sinned and everything changed. The four relationships were shattered. They were cast out of the garden and no longer met with God daily. They blamed each other and their relationship became one of domination and subjection, not mutual submission. Life in the world became hard, whether bearing children, or working the land. They started to die (Genesis 3).

So God chose individuals, like Abraham, and a people, Israel, to be different, to be in relationship with Him, and to bring blessing to God's fallen world (Gen 12:1-3). Two commands stand out among all others in the Old Testament Law – to love God with our heart and soul and strength (Deut 6:5) and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus said that ALL of the Old Testament commands hang on these two (Matthew 22:40). They are the Great Commands. As well as clarifying that our neighbour is anyone and everyone we come across (Luke 10:29-37), Jesus added one more command: we are to love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34). He called a community to follow him, and like it or not, we are part of this one body so we are to love one another.

Jesus puts love at the centre of his mission and his kingdom – love for God, love for other followers, love for all neighbours – he even told us to love our enemies (Matt 5:44). True, he didn't tell us to love ourselves, but the command to love our neighbour as ourselves assumes this, just as Paul also treats self-love as a fundamental basis for loving another (Ephesians 5:29). That doesn't mean our self doesn't need transformation – God loves us too much to leave us as we are! If we neglect the transformation of ourselves then we are not going to make progress on the other vital relationships.

Can we do this alone? No way! God's Spirit working within each of us and Jesus' life and death are the centre of our life together. They make a new start possible. Picture Jesus on the cross: the vertical bar symbolises renewed relationship with God and ourselves, the created ones once again coming under the authority of the Creator. The horizontal bar, the stretched, agonised arms of Jesus, pulls us towards those beside us: our brothers and sisters in Christ (each other), and others in the world – friends, family, neighbours, enemies. God cares about the whole world, including the physical creation, and the way society creates (or doesn't create) caring and just systems. All this is made possible by Jesus' willing sacrifice. Following Jesus really is about a God who welcomes us – and all people – with arms wide open. All our four vital relationships are held together by the cross. Jesus died and rose again to transform them.