

Coach House Church

BEACONS

SPOTS

20TH JULY 2020

Now 101 is a great number. Why? you may ask, well because it reminds me of the animated movie 101 Dalmatians. For those of you who haven't looked at a TV in the last 50 years, the movie is The film tells the story of a litter of Dalmatian puppies who are kidnapped by the villainous Cruella de Vil, who wants to use their fur to make into coats. Their parents, Pongo and Perdita, set out to save their children from Cruella, in the process rescuing 84 additional puppies that were bought in pet shops, bringing the total of Dalmatians to 101.

If you've had a chance to listen to my crazy talented wife's Beacon this week she brought home the message of the Lost Sheep, the 99 missing one of their own, and the Shepherd leaving them to go get the vulnerable one. The moral of the parable of the Lost Sheep is that each person is precious to God. No matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter where you live or what you've done.

Dalmatians are renowned for their playful nature, but more than that they are known for their white coat and black spots. In Jeremiah 13 the very famous phrase **"Can a leopard change it's spots?"** is found. We might ask it differently: can people change? Can I change? Can you—not even will you, but more to the root of the matter—can you be any different at the end of 2020 or even lockdown than you are right now?

For lots of people—maybe all of us—this is no simple question.

Let's look at a few examples - John is an alcoholic. He has finally admitted it after years of frustration and failure. But can he change or is he doomed to die a drunk? Beth started her marriage on the right track, but some where something went terribly wrong. She had an affair, left her husband and broke her parent's heart. Now her new life has fallen apart Can she change? Can a leopard change its

spots? Bobby is a troubled teen. He was messed up before that. He was always in trouble. He has dropped out of school and is running with the wrong crowd. His step dad has given up. His mum is at her wits end. The neighbours say he is no good. Can he change? Frank is a go-getter of a business man. He built a business from scratch and lost his family in the process. He has a full bank account and an empty house. The doctor just said slow down and get your priorities straightened out or else. Can he change? Warren is the pillar of the church. He has held it together for years—so most people say. Others say he has held it back for years. That he is a worker, no one can dispute. But he is also an angry, bitter man. On the outside he is deeply religious, but inside he is a mess. His life and his memories are full of hurts, doubts, and secret sin. Can next year be any different from last year? Can a leopard change its spots?

On and on the stories go. We could all tell them. We all know them. If not our own, then those of people we know and love. Can life ever be different? Can next year be better than last? Can I lose weight and keep it off this time? Can I get out of debt and on top of my finances and stay there? Can I be a better parent or husband or wife? Can a leopard change its spots? Can I overcome a secret, besetting sin? Perhaps anger, bitterness, thoughts, or a habit that I just can't break despite years and years of New Year's resolutions? Can we ever become the kind of bold, disciplined praying Christians preachers talk about? Or will this year be like last—a flurry of good intentions in January, limping into disappointment in February and outright failure by Easter?

What do you think? Can people really change? Can a leopard change its spots? Can a person really be "born again?" As church-going types we know what we are supposed to say. But do we really believe that people can fundamentally change?

Can a leopard change its spots? Can people every really change? This question provides a good window into the opening chapters of the book of John and the story of Jesus.

The opening chapters are very people centred. Much of the rest focusses on Jesus' teachings. But at the beginning John draws our attention to some of the people Jesus met and what happened next. Today I want to only tease you with a bit of the story. We will not even look at much of John's message. Instead I want you to think deeply with me about this fundamental question of questions that lies beneath the entire Bible—and the one we wrestle with in very personal and practical ways. Can a person change?

To begin, some people say yes. Of course, people can change, we are told. It is simply a matter of education or training or re-training or rehabilitation. Many of our best social programs are based on this. From welfare reform, to political initiatives, to social engineering to counselling and psychological therapy—all presume the ability of people to change or be changed by other people. Most of these efforts are well intended. Some seem to accomplish a little bit for a little while.

In the past, less so today, people were very confident that people could be changed. A long time ago, at the beginning of the last century and the beginnings of many of scientific and technological innovations such as electricity, cars, and modern medicine, nearly everyone thought that heaven on earth was just around the corner. What man messed up science would fix was the common attitude. Optimism reigned. Many thought that evil and suffering would soon be wiped out by bright science, good politics, and universal education. Former US President Teddy Roosevelt was less enthusiastic. He warned on one occasion that if you take a train robber and only educate him, you simply enable him to steal the whole rail road next time.

And so on the other hand, there are many cynics in our world. Some have concluded that people simply don't change, period. More than that, people can't change. They explain it in lots of different ways, but the conclusion is always the same. Some point to the environment or one's surroundings and say that a person can never rise above their upbringing. More and more folk are looking for hereditary or genetic explanations for why people are the way they are. Bad seed produces bad fruit and there is nothing that can be done about it, is the principle for many.

Most of us have learned by experience that most people don't change. We quickly begin to wonder if it is worth the effort to keep hoping and praying for change in those we love. Some are overly optimistic, thinking that people can be changed if you use just the right techniques. Other see things just the opposite. People not only seldom change, they can't, we are told by many. The Bible has a third view. It is very important to understand this. Without appreciating this, we can never truly grasp the Gospel. Without this perspective, the Bible will always be a frustrating book of rules and laws. It will never be a source of hope and transforming power.

Put simply, the Bible teaches that we human beings are sinners. Our behaviour is messed up because our heads and our hearts are messed up. We are bent and

broken and not at all what God intended us to be. You can philosophise about the whys and wherefores, but the result is clear. Something is wrong and until it is fixed we are forever failing to do what we know we should much less the rest of the just and righteous expectations of our maker. But God didn't leave things there. From the beginning, he set in motion a plan that could result in the redemption and restoration of human kind. Jesus Christ came into the world to bring that plan about. The result: personal, spiritual, and moral change is hard. It is rare. It is difficult. But with God all things are possible. What we do not, cannot, and could not do—Jesus Christ makes possible.

What we must also consider is that fact WE cannot change someone. So often we try and change someone but we must let God do the changing. I often want to instill my point of view or my values onto someone and for them to own it as their own. But that's not right. They will never take my values for their own because that's just on the surface, its not changing the heart. But if its God's will, then change will come, but not my deeds or words but by the mercy, grace and love of God being shown. And in His time. Yes sometimes we need to lead people to the answer, but we are only a vessel and God is the true life changer.

The Bible makes it very clear that while the world may like to tell us that "the leopard can't change its spots," that some people are just too far gone to be changed, there is good news. It can happen to anyone. No one is too evil or too far gone to be radically and totally remade by the power of Jesus. Do you catch the significance of these words from (1 Cor 6:9-11) Don't you realise that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."



JAMIE BAKER



Coach House Church

leadership@coachhousechurch.org // 0161 432 5604

the coach house church, 222 wellington road north, stockport sk4 2qn