

## Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2023

In a desperate mid-life crisis attempt to be hip and trendy (I celebrate my 'Herbie' birthday this year...if you know, you know), I've engaged with an app called BeReal. In a social media world where image is king and presenting yourself as the best version of you - whatever that means - this app flies in the face of that and basically encourages the user to portray it as it is, no filters, no makeup, no staging, just the mundane every day. The element of surprise is that you never know when the 'BeReal alert' will ping on your phone so you have no way of preparing a background or environment that will make it or you shine.

As I type, my BeReal has literally just pinged which is ironic as I've been planning this blog since yesterday. My photo therefore shows my laptop as the front facing image and my mugshot, complete with reading glasses! as the rear. The group of people I follow on the app are now posting as well; these include – in no particular order – a floor tile, revolving doors, a blank piece of paper, a dog in the distance and a brick wall. This is excellent BeReal material....dull, boring, grey but real, so very real. None of them have taken the optional – but shaming – retake and I find myself applauding my fellow 'realers' for being true to the script.

Being real is something that comes more naturally to some than others. There are those who put on a front because they don't want to reveal how they are actually feeling; there are often perfectly valid reasons for this, including past hurt, being let down, trust issues and of course that we're all wired differently. That said, I sometimes see posts on social media and I find myself asking the question 'is that really how they are or is it a superficial front beneath which lies a whole world of pain?'. And then there are others who are easy to read. For good or for bad, I fall into the latter category. I've wised up a bit over the years about how honest to be and with whom but I'm still pretty transparent and, as an external processor, I rely on safe and sage like friends to speak with when I'm not in a great place. I need that space to be filter free and vulnerable.

I think the nature of my vocation means that some people's expectations of ministers is that they're strong and intact and able to deal with the rigours of pastoral life and ministry. In reality (and I'm discovering on a daily basis that I'm not alone in this) ministers are broken people who are holding it together by the grace of God. I don't apologise for my honesty on this but rather embrace it. In the almost four years that Caroline and I have been co-ministers at ABC, I've become aware on many occasions that my own vulnerability has been permission giving for others who've been struggling (and as a result feeling guilty about struggling) to acknowledge the pain that casts a long shadow, but fundamentally know that God is not distant in the struggle but closer than we think.

It's one of the reasons that I find the Psalms a good place to turn when the 'BeReal of life' feels like barbed wire being pulled through your soul. David's transparency and dialogue with God is a template that we can all embrace in the most brutal of times. Psalm 13 is a case in point. First David lays bare his feelings.....

*How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my*

*heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Then he petitions God to change it...*

*3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. Before ultimately getting to a place of trust that the God He pleads with will stick close regardless of the pain he's currently encountering...*

*5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. 6 I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.*

If you're anything like me then you can easily sit with the first two elements of that psalm and struggle to get to the chink of light at the end and with it, the truth of who God is.

And yes, the being real of life means acknowledging and owning the pain, hurt, rejection, frustration and despair but...and it's a hugely important 'but'...being a follower of Jesus gives us hope in the darkest of times and it is something that we've just gotta cling onto. I say this because the realness of our situations must also embrace the realness of a God who remains constant and that knowledge can counterbalance our real sorrow with the simple but profound understanding of a very real God, who IS and will always be.

I pass this on not as a theory but as something I've had to prove, especially in recent months, and therefore it isn't a dispassionate narrative that piggy backs on someone else's experience; this is my story and so, in your own BeReal, I encourage you to make it yours.