Chapter one

DISTINCTLY PROBLEMATIC

HOLINESS IS A 'MUFASA' WORD

In one of my favourite scenes in *The Lion King*, two hyenas are talking about the king of the jungle, Mufasa. For one of the hyenas, every time the name Mufasa is mentioned it sends a shiver down her spine. For many people, the word 'holiness' has the same effect; it has become something of a 'Mufasa' word.

You see, holiness has an image problem. In many quarters, it's a word which elicits negative connotations and legalistic impressions, too often conjuring ideas of 'holier than thou' and judgmental attitudes. Talk of holiness can easily make us feel inadequate, a measure of how far we've fallen short, a reminder of how much further we have to go.

Some years ago, I was asked to lead a church weekend event on this very theme. A number of people came up to me and said, 'I've

been dreading this weekend for months!' FYI, that's never something the person leading your church weekend wants to hear. But it wasn't me they were dreading (at least that's what they said). They were dreading three days of hearing how badly they had failed in the pursuit of holiness.

There's something wrong with that picture, isn't there? If the gospel is good news, offering freedom, how is it that reflecting on holiness leaves some of us feeling trapped in a sense of inadequacy and failure? Why does this 'Mufasa' word send a shiver down the spine? Something is wrong; and I believe it is that for many, we so easily and so often misunderstand what holiness is, what it is for, and how it is expressed.

WHAT IS HOLINESS?

The best description of holiness that I've discovered comes from a fabulous woman called Ruth Etchells. Dr Etchells was a former principal of St John's College, Durham University, and the only woman to have held this role in the college's 100-year history. Indeed, she was the first layperson and the first woman to be appointed principal of an Anglican theological college, and this at a time fifteen years before the Church of England would ordain women as priests. She describes holiness in this way: 'Holiness is actually the shining dazzle of profoundest divine love exchanged continually within the Trinity and poured out for creation in all its forms for our deepest and most joyful good.'[1]

Three things strike me here. First, that holiness is a shining dazzle. Too few people are inclined to think of holiness as *shiny*. Most of us think of holiness as dour, hard work, sober and serious. Etchells reminds us that holiness is *attractive*. Second, that holiness is rooted in divine *love*. This not only reminds us that holiness and love are necessarily linked, but also that holiness is the core of God's being. If holiness is rooted in divine love, and God is Love, then whenever we talk about holiness, we are in fact trying to describe that which is the very heart of God. Third, holiness is rooted in divine *action*. Holiness is divine love poured out on creation. Who does the pouring out? God. Why is the love poured out? For our deepest and most joyful good. Holiness is rooted in the gracious action of God.

I grew up in a church that was very keen on holiness. It was emphasized, pursued, preached, taught and modelled; but it was not *gracious*. Instead it was judgmental and legalistic. I don't remember what I was taught about holiness, but I do know what I learned: holiness is a long list of rules and things that you don't do. In reality, this couldn't be further from the truth. You will never become holy because you work hard at it and keep all the rules. Throughout this book we will learn that holiness or sanctification is not so much about what we do or don't do; it's in fact about what God does and has already done in Jesus Christ. Holiness is the product of God's grace. You are saved by grace; you are also sanctified by grace. We are holy when we reflect something of God's goodness

and glory in the world; holiness is not so much about sinless perfection as it is about Christlike reflection.

Moreover, holiness is for our deepest and most joyful good. I grew up viewing holiness like the spoonful of cod liver oil that my parents made me and my siblings take each day as a tonic for good health; it was good for us but tasted *vile*. But Dr Etchells' definition suggests that holiness is more like children's cough-and-cold syrup; it's both good for you *and* pleasant to the taste. Much like this sweet-tasting medicine, holiness will make us *well*; the path to human wholeness is by means of God's holiness.

HOLINESS IS TRANSFORMATIONAL

If holiness is not (as many of us have too often thought!) primarily about prohibited behaviour and rather about positive *action*, it follows that holiness is transformational. However, transformation is only truly valuable to the church if it is also *conformation* to the image of Christ and to the mission of God. Therefore, to pursue holiness is to acknowledge that all is not well. Individuals, communities and the world need to be both transformed and conformed to the image of Christ. In many ways, this is obvious. However, there are so many of us who do not really want to be transformed. We are who we are; we've spent a great deal of our time and energy figuring out who we are. In an age in which tolerance is the supreme virtue, the idea that anyone should tell someone else that he or she is in need of transformation feels a

little uncomfortable. We may not mind a little spit and polish, but we don't really want to be transformed.

The truth is you need to be transformed; we need to be transformed; our churches, *good Lord*, need to be transformed. The problem with transformation is that challenges often have to be faced and sinfulness has to be acknowledged. To see the world by the light of the revelation and holiness of God is to have our vision corrected. It's like a visit to the optician: when we are finally offered the right lens the world suddenly becomes clear. That is the primary positive action of holiness; it transforms.

HOLINESS IS MISSIONAL

Holiness is not only transformational; it is also inherently missional. The two are closely linked. If holiness is divine love poured out on creation, then holiness becomes a powerful witness to the love of God and the power of the gospel to transform communities; holiness and love are integrally linked.

We see this in Jesus' reaching out to tax collectors and sinners, in the early saints martyred for their faith, in the early Methodists reaching out to the least and lowest; we see it today in Street Pastors, working in the unsociable hours when most of us are safely tucked up in bed. Christian communities that pursue holiness, as integrally linked with love, will inevitably end up in mission. Quite often they may not think that's what they're doing.

They are simply trying more fully to love God and to conform to the image of Christ. But we underestimate how powerful a community is that is shaped deeply and passionately by the love of God.

If some earlier Christians had had their way there'd be no sex, gambling, alcohol or sports on a Sunday. That vision of the world was rejected. Instead, when we understand holiness as positive action, as a reflection of Christ, it is deeply and powerfully attractive. I am not suggesting that holiness will not require that some forms of behaviour are prohibited. I am suggesting that the transforming power of God will address those far more effectively than judgmental humans or a list of dos and don'ts.

HOLINESS IS RADICAL

Where holiness is transformational and missional, it can also be radical – a far cry from the idea of stringency and prohibitions. Radical holiness is rooted in an optimism of grace; it is to believe that there are no limits on how much God's goodness and glory may be reflected. It is a way of seeing the world and all within it as pregnant with the possibilities of grace despite its brokenness, sinfulness and dysfunction.

We see this in the way Jesus engages with a hated chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Tax collectors were generally seen as thieves, collecting not only tax but also their

expenses (Luke 3:12–13). The taxes were paid to the Roman oppressors, with Jewish tax collectors exploiting Jewish people on behalf of Romans. Moreover, Zacchaeus was a *chief* tax collector. Needless to say, he was not well liked by the Jews.

As Jesus walks through town, Zacchaeus merely intends to look upon him from a safe distance, wanting to catch a glimpse of the miracle worker from Nazareth. Jesus has other ideas. He comes to where Zacchaeus is, calling him from hiding. There is urgency in his summons: *Hurry! I must stay at your house! Today!*

In that moment of inclusiveness, Jesus embodies a radical holiness which believes that there are no no-go areas in which God's goodness and glory may not be reflected. However, the action of divine grace is also evident in Zacchaeus' desire. What prompts a wealthy man, a person of some significance, to run and climb a tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus? Men of a certain age and status did not often run in that time and culture. There was something drawing Zacchaeus to Jesus, something that he might not have been able to articulate, or even acknowledge, but prompting desire and action nonetheless. This is 'prevenient grace', the grace that goes before, the grace that draws us to God. In Jesus we see a radical holiness, willing to see God's grace reflected in the most tarnished and hated of tax collectors. And in Zacchaeus we see prevenient grace, drawing him towards such holiness.

A FRESH LOOK

Far from a view of holiness as rules and regulations that I – and I imagine many of you from time to time – have too readily adopted, this understanding of holiness begins to unpack the 'Mufasa' word and see it as reflecting the very nature of God: transformational, missional, radical and inherently linked with love. Throughout this book I am going to ask you to suspend your pre-held views on the subject – good and bad – so that we can begin to explore, understand and experience holiness afresh. It's one of the reasons I didn't call this book *MORE Holiness*. Unpacking what the Bible says on the topic, we are going to question what holiness is, how we get it and why (if at all!) we should want to pursue it. But first, I have a confession to make.

My name is Calvin and I'm a theologian . . .

WRESTLING WITH THEOLOGY

'Theology' is another of those 'Mufasa' words, which for many will not only send a shiver down the spine but may make you want to put this book down. But wait! If you have come to this book with questions – which I imagine you have – you are *already* wrestling with theology. Whenever we struggle to express and to make sense of our understanding of God, we are undertaking the task of theology. Not dry, boring, irrelevant theology (and I would argue that anything that is dry, boring and irrelevant can't be good

theology!) but theology that is wrestling with who God is and who the people of God should be in response. Most of the theology in this book is implicit. However, as we are setting out, it feels appropriate, and indeed important, to be explicit about the theological task we are undertaking.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The English word 'theology' comes from two Greek words: *theos* and *logia*. *Theos* refers to God and *logia* to speaking or studying. Just as biology is the study of *bios* or life, archaeology the study of *archeos* or ancient things, and anthropology the study of *anthropos* or humanity, so theology is the study of *theos* or God.

Simple enough, right? But this analogy begins to break down almost immediately. First, God is not simply an object or system that humans can study. God can't be observed through a telescope or microscope, or interviewed for divine opinions. God is a person who chooses whether to reveal himself. Second, God is also beyond human comprehension, so even if we were able to observe God we wouldn't be able to understand God adequately. Third, even if we did understand God fully we would struggle to express that understanding, because our language is too limited to describe all that God is. It's possible to observe and understand a sunset or rainbow, but we can't adequately describe what we have seen. Our language is too limited. If a sunset is beyond our description, what chance have we of describing God?

Don't put the book down yet. As God is not simply a subject or system, theology is possible despite human limitation, because God has chosen to reveal God's self. Divine revelation is what enables us to speak of God, to study and learn of God, because God has revealed by his grace what our senses alone would never be able to observe. Divine revelation, through the word of God supremely revealed in Scripture, and the act of God supremely revealed in Jesus Christ, enables theology; revelation enables us to undertake the theology of holiness.

A key element to note about theology is that it is a corporate undertaking. The word *logia* refers to speaking. Speaking implies a conversation partner. So theology, the speaking of and study of God, requires conversation about God.

HOW DO WE DO THEOLOGY?

If you're asking this question, you're not alone. For Christians, this conversation has been ongoing for two thousand years as we have wrestled to make sense of God's revelation in Jesus and in Scripture. God invites humanity into relationship, so that out of that relationship a deeper understanding of God, ourselves and the world becomes possible. In other words, theology is a discourse about God that is a response to God's revelation supremely expressed in Jesus Christ. It is happening every time we try to make sense of our beliefs and practices – whether or not you decide to use the 'Mufasa' words.

MAKING SENSE OF METAPHOR

A key element of our making sense of our theology, and one we will use in our journey with holiness, is the use of metaphor. As human language is not adequate to the task of capturing the glory and goodness and holiness of God, we are forced to use the imagery of metaphor. Even metaphors are inevitably inadequate, but that is not to underestimate how powerful a theological device metaphor can be.

When we say, 'The LORD is my shepherd' (Psalm 23:1), that is a powerful and striking metaphor. However, when we say that 'God is the king of all the earth' (Psalm 47:7), that is also a metaphor, for God is no more a king than a shepherd. Both terms are inadequate to describe who God is and who he is to us, but that is not to say that they are not hugely powerful images for aiding and expressing our understanding of God.

Perhaps one of the best-known visual metaphors in the UK is the London Tube map. We all know that the underground train tunnels aren't to scale; they don't extend in straight lines and are not painted in the colours that appear on the map. And yet, despite its limitations, the map is still an essential tool for any who want to navigate their way around London.

Over the course of this book we will engage with a number of models and metaphors for holiness. They won't always be labelled

as such, in much the same way as the limitations of the Tube map aren't defined in small print somewhere. But that is what they are.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY?

Fans of the film *The Hobbit* might remember that it was subtitled *The Unexpected Journey*. The hobbit's journey was both literal and metaphorical. By taking that journey he found out a great deal about good and evil and truth. He also found out about himself.

This book is an invitation to take a theological and historical journey through Scripture in the hope that, like the hobbit, we will discover a great deal about good and evil, truth and ourselves. Beginning in the Old Testament and journeying to the New will allow us to undertake a thorough and serious exploration of Scripture to see how ideas of holiness were built over time. It will also allow us to trace where our (often misplaced!) conceptions of holiness come from and better locate our contemporary understanding of holiness.

Many complex issues need to be rooted in their history if they are to be deeply understood. We'll never understand #BlackLivesMatter unless we take the time to revisit the American Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Understanding why feminist perspectives are so important requires that we revisit our history to remember that not so long ago women were considered inferior to men. Similarly, a biblical understanding of holiness requires a

journey back to our roots in the earliest parts of Scripture. Before we set off, perhaps we should consider one central question that remains: *why* is holiness important? It is to that question that we are going to turn first.

You shall be holy,
for I the LORD
your God am holy.

(Leviticus 19:2)