

Sermon 30th August 2020, 12th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 17)

Reverend Irene

Romans 12: 9-end. Matthew 16: 21-end.

When my first son was born, I loved him so much (I still do by the way) that I thought I'd never have more children because I couldn't possibly love them as much, of course that's ridiculous. There are many kinds of love, and we can love many people in different ways. We can love our husband/wife/partner for many years as the first love of youth changes to incorporate the years and the experiences we go through. We can have a love/hate relationship with our siblings or even our children. We can feel very strong bonds of love through a friendship that starts in school and carries through life, or a friendship made in an instant.

Love comes in many guises, we can't plan it or pick or choose who we fall in love with, but when love "happens", it is a truly wonderful thing.

Having said all that, I struggle to understand how we, as Christians are afraid to acknowledge or talk about the love of God, almost as if we don't believe it or are embarrassed by it. God is generous and awe inspiring in the love he has for us, he created us and he died for us, even those we don't like and those who do wrong. We know that because Jesus once said "God is good to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35).

Perhaps we find hard to believe, but that is the magnitude of God and his unremitting love for humankind.

I've always remembered something said to me by a clergyman many years ago: "It's easy to love those we love, but it's not easy to love those we don't even like." But that is the challenge we face as Christians.

In our first reading we heard Paul describe what sincere love looks like, not only within our families, or church community, but in the world at large. We are to have no pretence in our love for others, to love sincerely those who are not like us, those who irritate us, and even more, to love those who do us harm! Perhaps we have learned how to tolerate the unlikeable and pretend to care about their problems, or feign indignation when we learn of injustices.

But God calls us to real and sincere love that goes beyond pretence, goes beyond the love we feel for those who love us and to live in harmony with one another through thick and thin. That's a tough ask!

In our Gospel reading we see that Peter hasn't quite grasped the enormity of who Jesus is. In his acknowledgment as Jesus the Messiah, he is almost there, but he is still thinking in earthly terms as he confronts Jesus for talking about his forthcoming death. Messiah's don't lose, they win and everyone bows down and worships them he says.

The vehemence of Jesus' response to Peter shows his human side, it would have been easy for him to walk away from his journey to the cross with all that physical pain, we know he thought about it many times.

Jesus had to make his commitment to God over and over again, he had to use his power of love and endurance to fulfil his journey to the cross as God's way to bring us life.

That was the ultimate sacrifice God made out of love for his creation.

So surely we can show our love in return. Love that takes effort, patience and time, and demands our energy, our commitment, and our sacrifice. Unless we allow our own hearts to be humbled by the great love of God, we are likely to dispense only superficial love for those of other parts of the world or not Christians or not of our own personal school of thought.

As I said last week, being a Christian is not easy, it's not a passive role, it is one where we should be constantly looking for opportunities to make a difference to peoples' lives, and in doing so, make a difference in the world. And in making that difference, there is the possibility that we may not be liked, or be referred to as "do gooders" or worse, but we have to put up with that and get on with doing good just the same; that is God's way.

So when we declare that God is love, we must believe it, show it and live it in our own lives by the things we say and do.

Otherwise, all we are doing is falsely portraying God with a smiling face, behind which is hidden a frown.

The world is crying out for love, if it doesn't come from us, where will it come from?

Reverend Irene