

Showing Christian Love

Today's Gospel is not the usual negative reference to scriptural law. It is the command: love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and love your neighbour as you love yourself, something never negative or limited, something totally free, spontaneous, personal, unrequited, passionate and deeply heartfelt – Christian love.

Contemplating the word love is to cross a minefield. It is grossly overworked. We all use the word readily and by doing so mean many things by it. Love is expressed in so many ways. The young man and woman were deeply in love and while he was away with the navy for three years, he wrote to her every day without fail. At the end of the three years came the happy wedding; she married the postman. Love, H.L. Mencken said, is the triumph of imagination over intelligence and it was Charlie Brown of Peanuts fame who said: nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love.

When Charlie Brown visits Lucy's 5cent psychiatrist's booth, in one of Mike Yaconelli's Peanuts cartoons, she says to him that life is like a cruise liner. Some people put up their deckchairs at the stern of the liner and like to look back to where they have come from. Others like to pitch their deckchairs at the bow and look ahead to where they are going. "What about you, Charlie Brown?" Where would you put your deckchair on the cruise liner of life?" There is a long, bemused pause. "Heck," he replies, "I don't even know how to put my deckchair up!" I am convinced that not knowing how to put our deckchair up is the reality for most of us, not just Charlie Brown. But this is no secret, so why should we act as though it is. Maybe it has something to do with what Paul calls, unconditional love, which to most of us is beyond our experience. Our love, even the very deepest love we can offer always comes with provisos and limitations. We find it hard to believe that God loves us as we are and accepts us unreservedly.

John clearly writes: God is Love, he that dwells in love is living in God and God in him. Jesus is clear too: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Paul's use of the word agape, for love, is a good starting point. Agape is about the will, not about emotions. It means, in Stephen Neill's definition, 'the steady direction of the will towards another's lasting good.' Paul's early readers found great difficulty in accepting that anyone of them could ever possibly love God and that God could love them. A mystical barrier, created by generations of a relationship with a seemingly vengeful and distant God made this closeness impossible even to contemplate. Paul broke new ground when he told the Corinthian Church that without the gift of God's love any Christian sacrifice is valueless, like a resonant gong or tinkling cymbal. Peter also writes, "let your love for each other be real and from the heart." Paul was in no doubt; there is nothing love cannot face. Jesus demonstrated this on the cross and as J. B. Phillips says: there is no end to its trust, no fading of its hope, it can outlast everything."

We all come across many amusing stories of people trying to keep the fire of love burning. Such tokens, well meaning as they are, are not what Christian love is about. The Good Samaritan story, in our Gospel today, is a wonderful example of neighbourly love. The Levite and priest leave the poor man stripped and beaten, to die. The Samaritan takes pity and offers helps which is practical and well-directed, not weighed down by religious dogma or regulations, not even social or cultural divisions. Samaritans were hated by the Jews which makes this revolutionary and risky story all the more remarkable, a point picked up by G. K. Chesterton when he said: the Bible tells us to love our neighbours but also to love our enemies, probably because they are generally the same people.

The late Eddie Askew, in his book, *Disguises of Love*, changes the end, writing: 'then for a long time no-one came, the sun beat down by day, the night was very cold and the man died.' He called it the Absent Samaritan. The Good Samaritan does give us the mistaken assumption that there is ALWAYS a Good Samaritan, somebody will always turn up to help. That's comforting but misguided, as a cry for help is so often ignored or lost.

This change does make us think that our attempts of neighbourly love are often fraught with problems of time, embarrassment, the feeling of inadequacy, or knowledge of what to do for the best; the lack of resources, or of the willingness to take risks, to do something different, and of a blinkered and restricted view we have about customs, regulations and tradition. There is something else too. In the Book of Ecclesiastes the author writes: "he that observes the wind shall not sow, he that regards the sky shall not reap." The author realised the futility of waiting for ideal circumstances before taking action. Where and when is that ideal ever going to happen? How do we know when it is about to happen? If the Samaritan had waited for ideal circumstances, the man, beaten up and robbed, would have died for sure. In the Good Samaritan we see a practical, relevant side to our faith. In the Absent Samaritan, we see a warning. How easy it is to be like the Levite or priest, easy to criticise and judge, easy to ignore and limit our faith by our own prejudices and experience, easy to show up the irrelevance of God's Holy Spirit to us?

I am pleased to be speaking on this positive and uplifting theme today. Lucy's reference to the cruise liner of life is interesting as the analogy between our faith and boats is a popular one. But Lucy referred to Charlie Brown's deckchair and I have fond memories of struggling with deckchairs on the beach, only for my embarrassment to be noticed by someone brave enough to help me in my growing frustration. This deckchair analogy is simple but, for me, a very powerful one.

Back eight years or so, when I was Head of Sixth Form at school, Darren, a second year Sixth Form student entered the school one morning and caused quite a stir. He was really happy. Donning a leopard skin hairstyle (blond with large black spots) he quickly gained attention from his friends. Darren was noted for his individuality; on charity non uniform days he wore his skate boarding or roller skating gear, but this seemed extreme even for him and on a normal day! He laughed and joked with friends and my instant reaction, as his Head of Year, was to put an immediate end to his fun! In my office, before I was allowed my onslaught, he bursts into tears. It wasn't so much that he was worried about what I was going to do, although Darren's first words were: 'I know I have done wrong, but you see....' And he poured out his story. It concerned Tim, his best friend, from outside school. The two had planned a post A Level Kenyan Safari in July and they decided that, just before they go they would dye their hair to match the local Kenyan wildlife. A few days before his 'shock' entry into school Tim had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer in the upper bone marrow of his legs. After many tests and several opinions came this devastating news for these friends. Darren was heartbroken and had decided to bring forward his hair colouring to coincide with a visit to his friend at a London hospital. Knowing that Tim had been informed of the seriousness of his cancer and that he would not make Kenya in July, maybe not even Christmas, Darren was happy that morning knowing that he had made a positive decision to make his friend feel good.

On another occasion, I had a phone call that really worried me. It was from Stephen's Mum. He was a Sixth Form student at school and had walked out of home the night before leaving a note, informing Mum that he needed to get away from everyone and everything. Stephen was sensitive, intelligent student, popular with his peers, on his way to three good A Level grades. Although forewarned by a friend of Stephen's it was shock, to me, all the same. To increase his Mum's stress his best friend had committed suicide the previous year and his parents had split up during the summer. The situation was hard.

Gradually Darren became happier. His visits made all the difference to both of them. His friend had recovered but would have to walk with crutches, maybe forever. But both of them did get to wear leopard skin haircuts in a Kenyan safari park. Stephen too, returned and was back in school soon after. Why? Because his two best friends went out of school and found him. They spent all day and most of the night finding him, talking to him and bringing him home. He had good friends, the very best.

Fast-forwarding to this academic year, now coming to an end, although I have been party to behaviour that I believe, was the geometric opposite of Christian love, I have also been privileged to share people's hurts and concerns, problems and joys as they struggle with their deckchairs on the cruise liner of life. Above all I have shared with the way in which these people have shown Christian love themselves and have experienced it themselves. Not this time Sixth Formers, but young mums with toddlers and more mature lifelong learners, many of them strong Christians, all facing a raft of different, often difficult even harrowing situations. Their experiences are amazing to share. Yes, there is always going to be an absent Samaritan and this is tragic. People do get ignored and forgotten and this makes our own actions, our own responses all the more important - the way we put up our deckchair and, importantly, where we put it. And equally, how we help and encourage others' efforts to show their own take on Christian love.

Jesus said that if we do what he commands us to do and love one another, then we can become his friends. What an incredible invitation that is for you and for me! However much we live in the past or look to the future we must not lose sight of the now. We can experience God's presence and love only in the opportunities he makes for us and we make for ourselves today. At the end of every service we say 'Go in peace to Love and Serve the Lord.' In serving we share OUR God of love with others. We all receive God's love. We all have many, great opportunities of following and showing others, the way of love. If we do, we all can have the incredible privilege of becoming friends of Jesus.

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14/7/13