

Sermon at St John the Evangelist, Cambridge - 2nd July 2017

'Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones... truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward...'

How do we build relationships, and communities of Christ-like love, in a world like this?

In our Gospel, Jesus concludes his instructions to the disciples - sent out to share the good news of the kingdom - as he began, with words about hospitality and relationship. Those who welcome the disciples, and who act generously towards the little ones, are blessed and will be rewarded.

I was amused that one of the commentaries on this passage suggests that to receive an apostle is to give him food and to listen to his words: on that basis I feel I'm doing rather well since I arrived here because a number of people have fed me & no one (so far) has refused to listen to my words!

Jesus makes clear, in this passage, that almost as important as the word itself, is the manner in which it's received and shared; in other words hospitality and generosity of spirit (both for the giver and the receiver - indeed, in God's economy, the two are often reversed) are just as important as the proclamation itself. Something that the first disciples would have to be taught, if they were to be effective: hospitality & generosity of spirit really do matter.

The word, after all, becomes flesh in Jesus, and Jesus - in his hospitality and desire to build relationships of mutual love - models to the disciples what a true witness to God's Kingdom looks like. As the missionary theologian, Lesley Newbegg, once wrote, 'The best hermeneutic [*or interpretation*] of the Gospel is a community of men and women who live the Gospel.' In other words, the best way of witnessing to Christ is to strive to follow Christ and to embody his words, in action.

The word in itself - especially in a culture saturated by information overload - is never enough. People want to see a word that is embodied and lived out... in hospitality and compassion, in relationship, and in communities of Christ-like love.

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I wonder what it was that 1st drew you to the Gospel; to belonging within a Church community? I suspect that for most of us (whether or not we were brought up as Christians; or were members of a Choir or Sunday School or Youth Group), that it had something to do with being drawn by people who sought, however modestly, to practise what they preached. Communities of love & service (of salt & light) who welcomed others in, and reached out in love & care of those in need.

I can't help reflecting on some of the key points in my journey, and some of the highlights of my nearly 20 years of ordained ministry...

- The youth camp I first attended, as a teenager, in the grounds of a Franciscan friary, where I discovered down-to-earth disciples of Jesus, and an atmosphere of unconditional love.
- The time I spent, as a student, in the Church of Christ the Saviour in Cape Town (one of our overseas links), a considerably deprived area, but a Church with transforming worship, practising radical hospitality and the

courage to reach out into corners of the community where no one else was willing to go.

- The simple but generous hospitality of my last parish, gathering (every Wednesday morning) large numbers of elderly and some isolated local residents, for free coffee and cake, an oasis at the heart of that neighbourhood.
- And practising, in Leicestershire, as a Street Pastor, joining (with others), late on a Friday night, to go out on patrol in our town centre: taking the love of Christ to those often lost or under the influence of drugs or alcohol; simply 'being there', to help, listen and care.

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Writing in the Church Times, a fortnight ago, Philip North (the Bishop of Burnley), reflected on the outcome of the General Election and strategies for renewal in our Churches; and he suggested that what really matters most is not the economy – important that this undoubtedly is – but relationships. 'The heart of the Gospel' he writes, 'is the healing of relationships between God and his creation, and thus between people, whom he calls to belong to each other. We have, (he concluded) a bold vision of what human society is called to be, one that we draw from the life of the Trinity itself... in which the poor and the forgotten come first, in which the beauty and dignity of all is acknowledged and respected, and in which God is all in all.'

+As Graham Tomlin, the Bishop of Kensington, reflected yesterday, in the wake of the appalling Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is often Churches – rooted in their localities and with the spiritual motivation and practical resources to intervene – who make the connection between individuals and the state, holding society together. I wonder how we would respond, as St John's, if the Grenfell Tower tragedy happened on our doorstep? Indeed how are we responding to the many (sometimes invisible) needs in this part of Cambridge: to the lonely, the disaffected, families under pressure and the homeless? How are we to open our doors, and to build transforming relationships and Christian community here, in such a way that proclaims Christ as much by our actions, as by our words?

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In 1935, a young Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, disturbed by the direction which society was taking in his native Germany, wrote a letter to his brother, Karl-Friedrich, in which he expressed this sentiment: 'The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism... [which he defined as]... a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount, in imitation of Christ'

And the amazing thing is that Bohoeffer sought to do just that. He gathered a community around him, out of which a book was inspired – all about what the daring enterprise of living Christian community really looks like – 'Better together'. And years later, long after Bohoeffer's martyrdom, significant numbers of Christians, across the western world, are being inspired to do just that: living what they call a 'new monastic' life, in their homes and parishes and work-places, seeking – in some small but no less real way, in everyday life – to follow the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, as the earliest Christian did, and remembering that the medium really is as important as the message: living hospitality and relationship, seeking to have the same mind (as St Paul put it) 'that was in Christ Jesus'.

As one of the Desert Fathers once commented: 'You don't build a house by starting with the roof and working down... You start with the foundations... The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win. The neighbour is where we start. Every commandment of Christ depends on this.'

Jesus sends out the disciples - and he sends us out - to preach the good news of his Kingdom. But above all, he invites us, frail and fragile that our intentions are, nonetheless to dare to live the good news we proclaim: in hospitality and community and generous love.

In a frenetic world, a world of individualism and calculated self-interest, daring to carve out oases of Christ-like love and attentiveness to others that His light might burn more brightly through us, drawing others to the living flame of God's love ...
Amen.