

# Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February '25, Epiphany 4

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10                      Psalm 71:1-6  
                  1Corinthians 13:1-13              Luke 4:21-30

I remember, quite some years ago, playing the piano at a friend's wedding. It was a joy to do this, but when everyone gathered for the service, it was clear there were three groups of musicians who had been asked to play. The group I was part of knew which songs we were playing, but we did not know what the others would do.

The bride entered, welcoming prayers were offered, and we all listened to the readings. A thoughtful sermon was followed by the invitation for the couple to stand in front of the priest, facing one another... holding hands. Then, to the surprise of most people, the quartet started to play.

The only people not surprised by this were the groom, the priest, and the quartet! Holding hands with the bride, the groom sang to her, *'Love Changes Everything'* which comes from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, *'Aspects of Love'*. There were plenty of tears in the room as he sang, *'Love, love changes everything, hands and faces, earth and sky. Love, love changes everything, how you live and how you die...'*

As human beings we each have our own experiences of being loved and not being loved. Love themes our songs, stories, poetry, and movies... and can make the difference between life being bearable or unbearable. It's interesting that at most funerals the main thing people remember and grieve is the way that a person loved, or failed to love.

So, when Jesus was challenged by a Jewish leader to name the most important law, we should not be surprised that Jesus chose to speak of love. There were six hundred and thirteen laws for Jesus to choose from and he affirmed two that were familiar, but he set them together for the first time. We use the paired laws often in Anglican worship: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all soul, with all your mind and all your strength; and love your neighbor as you love yourself."*

Jesus was a Jewish man, very familiar with the teachings of the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament – and these commandments to love God and neighbor come from two parts of the Torah. The command to love God comes from Deuteronomy (Deut. 6:5), and the command to love neighbor from Leviticus (Lev. 19:18). Sometimes, as Christians, we forget that these commandments were part of Jewish Law before Jesus brought them together in a new way.

The Jewish congregation we hear about in today's Gospel would have therefore been very familiar with the call to love God and love neighbor and we are told they were in the synagogue that day listening to Jesus teach. While teaching he reminded them of two occasions in their history where God had worked through the prophets Elijah and Elisha to bless people who were not Jewish.

For a people who believed they were chosen by God before any other people it would seem that this was utterly unpalatable for in mob rage they dragged Jesus out to the edge of a cliff with the intention of throwing him off! *As an aside - I'm hoping that this homily will not fill people with rage – but even if it did, I'm fairly confident that nobody will be killed because of it!*

We might now be tempted to think that we're better than that long ago synagogue congregation because clearly, they were not loving their neighbour as they dragged Jesus out to kill him. Hopefully, we don't kill people when they interpret Scripture differently to us, but we may respond in ways that are not kind or loving. We may mock them, diminish them to others, exclude them from decision making, assume that our thinking is superior, and refuse to recognise anything good in them...

When we choose to do this, I think we contribute to the simplistic polarisations that characterise much current thinking and public discourse. Even the algorithms of social media seem to generate this and nurture such narratives as: 'THEY' are bad, while 'WE' are good; 'WE' are right, while 'THEY' are wrong; and 'WE' are better, while 'THEY' are less.

I wonder if there is a person, or a group of people, you perceive to be 'THEM' because of their belief, or the choices that they have made... and what challenge our Christian faith makes to this way of thinking?

Clearly Jesus went to those considered 'THEM' by the religion of his time... and, I would suggest, we are uncomfortably called to do the same. A gift to ground our thinking about this comes from the first creation story in Genesis which affirms that all of humanity is made in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26). It's worth thinking about I reckon; not only are 'WE' made in God's image, but 'THEY' are also made in God's image! and, 'WE' are called somehow to love each other!

As an aside, but an important aside, I am not suggesting that this is a reason for people to stay together in relationships where there is ongoing violence and abuse. In such circumstances it would be appropriate leave, recognising that this is never straight forward, and then love from a safe distance!

I did not sing a song to Kate when we got married, but I have on a number of anniversaries since! Instead, we chose together some Bible readings and one of those is the famous one

from the first letter to the Corinthians. There is great wisdom in these words and not surprisingly it is the most popular Bible reading for Christian marriage ceremonies. Verses four to six particularly stand out: *'...Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong-doing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things...'* (1Cor. 13:4-6). The funny thing is that Saint Paul did not write this to give guidance for couples in their marriage!

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth because they were a divided community. They prayed, sang, and broke bread together... but, there was conflict and dysfunction. Certain groups and individuals thought they were better than the others and treated them accordingly. Paul wrote strongly and addressed each source of division: *'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And, if I have prophetic powers... and all faith... but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions... but do not have love, I gain nothing...'* (1Cor.13:1-3).

Those words are uncompromising. Paul seems to suggest that no matter what we do in Christian community it has to be grounded in love. And, if we're wondering what his understanding of love was, we can re-visit those enigmatic words: *"...Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things..."*

So, how do you and I experience and contribute to love being present in our family, our workplace, and church community? Is there patience and kindness, joy and hope? What do we do when we recognise envy, prejudice, and unkindness in our own behaviors... and, the behaviors of others?

These are important questions because the call to love does not seem to be an optional extra, but is core business for all who follow Christ.

Would you please join me as we close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the gift of your love.  
Through your Spirit help us grow in patience and wisdom,  
and help us perceive others with compassion.  
We pray in the name of the one who said,  
'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled...'  
Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**