

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 4th May 2025, Easter 3

Readings: **Acts 9:1-6**

Revelation 5:6-14

Psalm 30

John 21:1-19

Over the years I have loved the movie version of the musical, ‘Fiddler on the Roof’, because I think it is a great story, with terrific characters, and wonderful songs. I also enjoy the way that the principal character, Tevye, prays in many places, and that he loves his daughters as they grow up... even when they make decisions he doesn’t understand.

As each of his daughters marry for love Tevye finds himself thinking about his own, arranged marriage, to Golde. This provokes a lovely moment in the middle of the movie when he turns to her in bed and sings this important question, ‘*Do you love me?*’ She is surprised, and doesn’t want to answer, but Tevye persists and sings the question again, ‘*Do you love me?*’

Golde responds thoughtfully with these lyrics, ‘*For twenty-five years, I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, why talk about love right now?*’ Then to herself she sings, ‘*For twenty-five years, I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. For twenty-five years, my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?*’ And she concludes by supposing that she does love him, and he concludes by supposing that he does love her! Each then affirms to the other that it was reassuring to know! Clearly, being loved by someone is important.

After much research, the American family therapist, Gary Chapman, concluded that people principally experience love in five ways. They are acts of service, quality time together, receiving gifts, receiving words of affirmation, and affectionate physical touch. Chapman calls them ‘love languages’ and suggests that even though there are five, each person has a primary love language. This means that one of the five love languages speaks more powerfully to us than the other four.

Hypothetically, if your primary love language was ‘quality time’ and your partner gave you gifts, took care of everything in the house, hugged you often, and affirmed you with spoken and written words... you would not be feeling that loved because you yearn for them to just spend some time with you! You might acknowledge that they’re trying hard... but, they’re not quite hitting the mark!

I wonder if you’ve thought about this before, and if you have some sense of what your primary love language might be; and what the primary love languages might be for the people you care about?

In today's Gospel Jesus is remembered asking Peter three times, *'Do you love me?'*

My guess is that he didn't sing the question because it would have been an emotionally charged, real-life, conversation! Traditionally, the three questions are understood to be a counterpoint to the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus, after Jesus had been arrested. This is a safe way of interpreting the encounter between these two men because the focus is all on Peter, and we are just observers to a drama that unfolded a long time ago? But, how would we respond if Jesus met us later this week, and asked us the same question: *'Do you love me?'*

If we imagine someone looking at the way we live our life now, how we treat other people, and what we gave priority to... what evidence is there in all this to suggest that we love God, and follow someone called Jesus?

Remember the time when Jesus was challenged by a lawyer to name the most important of the six hundred and thirteen Jewish laws? In response Jesus prioritised loving God and loving neighbour. So, what might loving God and loving neighbour look like using Gary Chapman's five 'love languages' as a framework?

What does 'quality time' with God look like for you? My hunch is that it would include private prayer, public worship, and Bible reading? In 'Fiddler on the Roof' the principal character, Tevye, sang prayers of thanks before a meal, and offered conversational prayer from his cart, in his house, and while sweeping his barn! In remembering Tevye's places of prayer we can be reminded that we can pray anywhere... but, usually there are some places in which we find it easier to pray than others.

So, I wonder where your go to prayer space is? It could be somewhere in the house, or the garden; it could be while driving the car, walking, or sitting. Do you currently have a sense of energised vitality in your prayer relationship with God, or is it feeling pretty dry at the moment? How might that relationship be refreshed, and renewed?

We listen to readings in church, but understand that reading the Bible at home in a structured way, can also be incredibly life-giving. These days we can also listen to Bible readings through Apps and Podcasts, so maybe these are also ways to spend 'quality time' with God?

In prayer we can give and receive words of affirmation, and in Holy Communion we may even have a sense of being physically touched by God in taste?

In Christian stewardship we are encouraged to give some portion of our time, abilities, and financial resources...as gifts back to the One who we believe makes our lives possible; and,

maybe ministries within the life of the Church can be understood as ‘acts of service’? Whether it’s pastoral care, or administration; ministry with children, or outreach to the those in need; whether it’s helping to lead worship, or providing morning tea... all these things, hopefully, are motivated by love for God and love for neighbor.

Jesus asked Peter three times, ‘Do you love me?’ and each time Peter answered, ‘Yes!’ After each of Peter’s responses, Jesus gave a specific direction: ‘*Feed my lambs!*’ ‘*Tend my sheep!*’ ‘*Feed my sheep!*’

In the same way that we imagined Jesus asking us if we love him can we imagine Jesus giving us the same three directions: ‘*Feed my lambs!*’ ‘*Tend my sheep!*’ ‘*Feed my sheep!*’. If we accept this, we might helpfully ask: who are the ‘lambs’ and ‘sheep’ we are feeding, and tending? and, How are we doing this?

In asking who the ‘lambs’ and ‘sheep’ are in our lives I’m inviting each of us to initially think of people that we know: our family and friends; our neighbours, and people at church; our colleagues at work, and the people we spend time with socially. In many ways each of those people and each of those relationships can be understood to be gifts from God. Those people may, or may not, share our faith in Christ but they probably know faith is important to us. Surely these people are most of the ‘lambs’ and ‘sheep’ we are called to feed and tend?

God has, does, and will... bring people we don’t know into our lives and there may be opportunities to feed, tend, and get to know them. But, I think the primary group we are called to ‘feed’ and ‘tend’ are the people we are already in relationship with. If you like, they are ‘the flock’ we are part of – and who, in God’s grace, we are called to bless:

May God’s Spirit guide and help each of us in this ongoing work.

Let’s pray:

**Holy God,
we give thanks for each breath and heartbeat
that makes our lives possible,
and we give thanks for your love.
In your grace, give us wisdom as we follow you,
and love those we share life with.
We pray in the name of the one who said, ‘feed’ and ‘tend’,
Jesus, the risen Christ.
Amen.**