

faith working through love

a sermon preached on the
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st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18

If I lived in a country where Christianity is an offence, I wonder if there would be enough evidence of my Christian life for me to be convicted. For much of the second half of the 20th century in the communist countries of Eastern Europe, many Christians were arrested because of their faith, especially those who taught the beliefs of Christianity. Teaching, attendance at worship was often 'evidence' enough to secure a conviction. But the write of today's second reading the first letter of John looks for a different kind of evidence for Christian living—loving actions.

We cannot, of course prove either that we love someone or that someone loves us or it is usually not wise to try. Remember the story of Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*; the two young men make a wager with a cynical old friend that their fiancées will always remain true to them. They proceed to test this by putting on disguises and each wooing each other's fiancée. The wooing is too successful and much has to be done before the happy couples are re-united and reconciled. The opera ends with the recognition that 'tricks you play on other people, other people play on you'.

If we accept that love cannot be proved, it can certainly be demonstrated. This is what the writer of the first letter of John has in mind when he says that we 'know love' through the way in which God's Son laid down his life for us [1John 3.16a]. This demonstration of the divine love is intended to evoke an answering response in us: we, if we truly love, must be prepared to love in that same way, even to the extent of laying down our lives for others [1John 3.16b]. However, we many never be called on to make that supreme sacrifice and so we are immediately reminded that there are many occasions for lesser demonstrations of our love, including the very practical one of sharing the things we have with those in need of help [1John3.17]. This writer is making the same powerful point as author of the letter of James makes, when it scornfully dismisses those whose response to poverty and distress is to give a pious blessing without doing anything practical to help.

Some of us stand in genuine need of this reminder that our professions of love for, and devotion to God, are best demonstrated by our care for other people. We are the 'churchy' Christians, for whom the heart and centre of our faith is worship, prayer, scripture and sacraments. We work hard for the church, where we are often to be found, and we sing and pray our professions of love. But we are often in danger of forgetting that they are mere words unless they—and the intentions, which lie behind them—are expressed in loving deeds, which make a real difference to the lives of the poor, the needy and the marginalized.

Yet others of us are 'activist' Christians. We need no convincing about charitable giving or campaigning for good causes. We feel deeply about a wide range of social issues. We tend to be involved in things outside of the church rather than being part of a church committee. We, in turn, are often in danger of forgetting that these good works are done as the response of those who know themselves to have been first, and undeservedly loved by God who wants only the best for us. If that is taken away our activism may become a duty rather than a delight and be fuelled by guilt rather than grace.

The writer of this short letter speaks to all sorts and conditions of Christians, helping us to see how faith and deeds naturally go together and how gratitude to a loving God is the

wellspring for actions, which change the world. It is an attractive picture of a holistic Christian discipleship and one to which we can and should aspire, even though we do not always attain it.

There is another group, which the author of this letter is also aware, and they are the worriers. Every Church community has its worriers. These are the ones who worry that they do not get to enough church services that they are not on enough church committees. They also worry about not contributing enough to charitable causes, not being involved enough in social issues. If we are in this group then we often feel powerless and guilty and, in the long term, may become cynical and disillusioned, or else fall into the sin of despair. For us there is the reassurance that God knows us through and through, much better than we know ourselves. So when we condemn ourselves for our shortcomings, real or imagined, we need to hear that God does not [1 John 3.19-20]. It is sufficient to trust the love, which God demonstrates in Christ, and to offer ourselves as a channel through which that love may be shared with others.

Now whatever style of Christian discipleship we practice, we all need to recognise that we are called to obey the commandments of God by believing in Christ and by loving one another [1 John 3. 22b-24]. Note—whatever else this is, it certainly is not a requirement to live by the rules. The writer does not offer a list of ‘commandments’, which must be obeyed, nor is he trying to turn the teaching of Jesus into a new Law of Moses. We need to remember that the Jesus of the fourth gospel ‘commanded’ his followers to love one another and told them if they did this they would have deserved the title friends.

Now at one level we cannot command love, any more than we can prove it. But Jesus is not laying down laws to be obeyed. Rather, he is describing the characteristic qualities of those he calls ‘friends’—which of course, rather astonishingly includes ourselves! Those who are friends of Jesus will necessarily pattern their attitudes and relationships on his. And since the whole story of Jesus is about self-giving and sacrificial love—it follows that those who share his friendship will want their living to be in the same mould!

The evidence that we are Christians will be found in how much we want to be like Jesus—how much we want to imitate Christ in our daily living. Yet, as we know, this cannot simply be about doing in our own day what Jesus did in his, for the world today is vastly different from how it was in the time of Jesus. Rather it is about having the mind of Christ, about seeing the world and its needs with the same eyes of compassion that he saw it with, and above all, wanting to live as he lived, focussed on God and on other people rather than ourselves.

For all of us this is aspiration rather than attainment. It is the model to which we look, the ideal towards which we strive and the grace for which we pray. After all the only thing that counts is faith working through love.