

‘exactly what it says on the tin’

a sermon preached on the
fifth sunday of easter

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at

st john’s

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Grant, O God, that in the written word, and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In 1994, a UK company launched an advertising slogan for a type of timber product. It was such a successful campaign that it was still running in 2016. This is how it went:

This is Ronseal Quick Drying Wood Stain. You can’t miss it. It comes in a tin with Ronseal Quick Drying Wood Stain on it. It protects, and it’s rain proof in about 30 minutes. Which means, in about 30 minutes, your wood’s rain proof and protected. So if you’ve got wood to stain and you want it to dry quickly, use Ronseal Quick Drying Wood Stain. It does exactly what it says on the tin.¹

What really made the ad work was the catch phrase at the end: ‘It does exactly what it says on the tin’. This catch phrase was quickly generalised and entered the language as an expression meaning that the name of something is an accurate description of its qualities.

In today’s Gospel we have heard Jesus saying that Christians should be able to be recognised because our lives do *exactly what it says on the tin*.

Jesus says, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (John 13:34-35). This message, that we are to love one another, has run even longer than the wood stain ad, having been emphasised again and again over the last 2,000 years because it is central to our faith.

I suspect that it has also been repeated again and again because it is hard to do. People need reminding that God calls us to extend to others the same gift of grace that we have received, that we must love as we have been loved.

The ad makes two claims for its product. The first is that the wood stain protects wood against the weather and the second is that it dries quickly. If that’s what you want, they say, then this product will do exactly what it says on the tin.

Jesus tells us that it is through love that Christians will be recognised. So, if that is the case, what is it we should see, what does this love look like in action? What, if you like, do the readings set for our reflection this week say on the tin?

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is speaking about *agape* love. This Greek word describes the highest form of love; the love that God has for humanity and for all creation; the love that led Jesus to the cross. It is love that is given without reference to the worthiness of the one who is loved. This is love that is primarily an action rather than a feeling. It is not the heady, romantic love of eros, or the familial love of phileo. Agape love offers transformation and wholeness. It is the unconditional gift of God that loves unreservedly and undeservedly.

It is this kind of love that Christians are to practice and by which we are to be recognised. That’s a big ask. We are to live our lives so that, even when we don’t feel like it, even when our emotions would direct us otherwise, we act out of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Does_exactly_what_it_says_on_the_tin

love and a desire for goodness for the other, putting aside self-interest and not allowing our behaviour to be determined by whether or not we think the other is deserving of our love.

Do our lives do exactly what it says on the tin? How do we behave towards each other? Do we choose to extend kindness and generosity to those who have hurt us; to recognise the full humanity of others we would rather see simply as two-dimensional caricatures? Equally, are we able to gently challenge those we love, having the courage to speak uncomfortable truths? Do we prefer a simple, moral code or the complexity of love that is enacted always, and only, in relationship as we strive to understand the completeness of God's love for us and as we strive to offer that same gift to others?

Today's reading from the book of Acts describes Peter's challenging vision of God's inclusive love. God does not distinguish, no-one can earn God's love, it is always pure gift. Peter doesn't have a vision in which he is encouraged to demonstrate how broad minded he is by offering a condescending acceptance to others who are less deserving than himself. He has a vision that utterly challenges his cultural and religious worldview, in which he suddenly sees that the gift of God's love is given freely to others just as it has been given to him. God's love is not partial nor does it depend on human preferences.

This new understanding of God's call, leads Peter to action, teaching others of the all-inclusive love of God and enabling them also to come to faith. He recognises that, whatever he might feel, that's not the point; *If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?* (Acts 11:17). When Peter understands God's love in this new way, the action of God's love is to enlarge Peter, to make him more than he was before, more fully human, more aware, more alive.

When we love those we find difficult, do we tend to see that love as coming from the goodness and generosity of our own hearts, or do we love with the humility and gratitude of those who know that they too are loved in a way that can never be earned? Do our lives do exactly what it says on the tin?

The reading we heard today from the book of the Revelation to John, is a vision of what the fulfilment of God's love will look like. It is, of course, like all our language about God, metaphorical, filled with familiar images, (like excited brides), that attempt to express what we can only imagine; a world with no more death, no more crying, or mourning or pain, only newness, joy and the fulfilment of promise.

The wonder of the newness that is given by love is expressed in a prayer that we pray each Thursday during morning prayer:

Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us in your Son Jesus Christ; grant that, as he came to share our human nature, so we may be partakers in his divine glory.

The miracle of this Easter season is not just that we are made in God's image, but that we are restored through Jesus; not just that Christ came to share our humanity but that through his love, we can share his divine glory. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the remaking of all creation.

Sometimes, Easter Day can seem like a completion; Jesus was crucified and now he is risen, alleluia, the end. But in the immortal words of Winston Churchill; *this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.* As we repeat each week in the Eucharist;

Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.

This is transformative good news for us all. All our failure, pain, suffering, brokenness, all this is overcome and made new through the love of the resurrected Christ. The brokenness of being human doesn't have to be denied or suppressed, instead it can be offered to the One who loves us unconditionally and who makes all things new; the same One who calls us to participate in this making new by loving each other as we have been loved. This love is a call to action that makes a difference to the way we live our lives, that is visibly hopeful and exciting and is different from anything that the world can offer.

May God grant each of us the grace to live lives that do exactly what it says on the tin. Amen.