

re-defining 'love'

a sermon preached on the

Fifth Sunday of Easter

24 April 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Acts 11:1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1-16, John 13:31-35

I am grateful that following my reflection on the gospel, Andrew Porter generously agreed to speak in a personal way about what Thanksgiving means for him, on this one Sunday in the year when we talk explicitly about our commitment to St John's – in readiness for next Sunday.

Last Sunday Muriel helped us to recognise the pattern unfolding during the 50 days of Eastertime: the shift from resurrection appearances, to the *meaning of the resurrection* for those baptised into Christ. On Easter 4 we saw what it means to be 'shepherd': that freely chosen willingness to lay down one's life for others.¹ On this fifth Easter Sunday, we are invited to reflect on how the Good Shepherd re-defines what is meant by 'love'.

Now as it turns out – and once again, I did not 'plan' this – we have set aside just this one Sunday to prepare ourselves for our Patronal Feast and Thanksgiving next Sunday, and lo and behold, what a delight to discover that today's gospel hits just the spot. The heart of the matter is *love!*

But first, it's helpful to clear up some unhelpful misunderstandings.

As one of the baptised, to make a tangible and practical commitment to the faith community to which I belong is obvious – indeed, to not do so would be very strange. So, I *will* review the monthly amount I give to St John's through the direct debit arrangement I have with my bank. It's healthy to do this – and I have been doing so for as long as I can remember.

Next, a word about the word 'tithes' – a word frequently used in the bible, even more frequently used by what I will call 'prosperity churches'. In this and all of the previous seven parishes which have been my spiritual homes, I have always endeavoured to make my parish offering *proportional* to my income. This is a biblical teaching: and it's a psychologically sound practice for one's offering to be meaningful in proportion to one's blessings. What's not healthy is the literalising or legalising of a particular number – the letter kills, the Spirit gives life!² But infinitely more unhealthy, is the confusing of a Christian understanding of sacrificial love, with what is in fact merely pagan prosperity doctrine. We do not make our offering in order to convince God to give us what we want, to make us wealthy and so on. That is not Christ-like. As the great early church teacher Origen said: 'Prayer is not about getting benefits from God; but about *becoming more like God.*'

So let us be very clear – as we make our annual review of our offering to the work of ministry and mission of this parish – we are not in the business of attempting to win God's approval, or speculating on the 'futures market' of religious fire insurance. We are not trying to accrue celestial frequent fliers points.

Turning now to the gospel for the day, what I want to draw our attention to, is this. Immediately preceding today's gospel segment is the momentous declaration: "And it was night".³ Today's gospel teaching is given in the context of 'night'. Darkness. Betrayal.⁴ Betrayal is Jesus' experience.

In fact, betrayal is central to being Christ-like. More precisely, Christ-likeness is revealed in how one responds to betrayal. Without betrayal, there is no revelation of Christlikeness. Not only Judas betrays him:⁵ all betray him. So when Jesus tells them: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also ought to

¹ John 10:11

² 2 Corinthians 3:6

³ John 13:30

⁴ John 13:11, 18, 21, 27

⁵ John 14:38

love one another”,⁶ he is defining the meaning of ‘love’ in new and unexpected terms. Specifically, in terms of how he will respond to the reality of betrayal. It is the betrayed slaughtered Lamb seated on the throne who declares: “See, I am making all things new”.⁷

You see, to call upon people to ‘love one another’ is neither specifically Christian – all religions do that. Nor indeed especially ‘religious’ – many have observed that frequently it is supposedly ‘non religious’ people who are better at loving.

But this is a ‘new’ commandment because the definition of ‘love’ as Christ-like is most definitely ‘new’. For while we do not find it too difficult to give to those we like⁸ – even to those we don’t know, if they haven’t offended us – when people offend us in some way we instinctively withdraw our affections, and certainly our money! The ‘new’ commandment is to give ourselves freely, even to those who betray us, as the resurrection appearances so clearly demonstrate. The icon in the chapel makes visual this fundamental of Christian theology: the Christ returns to those who have betrayed him, with pierced hands and feet and side, and blesses them!

The world will know that we are truly disciples of Christ by this: that we give ourselves freely – possibly even increasing what we give – even when we have been betrayed.⁹

As anyone can see, this is completely unlike prosperity doctrine – which is of course the small self trying to get what it wants.

Therefore, the true business of our Thanksgiving Commitment renewal is of course not primarily a matter of finances – but *always a spiritual matter* at the core. The true measure of Thanksgiving is of course our spiritual vitality – from which Centre everything else flows.

Love – Christ-like love – is seen in the ability to be free of survival-driven experience, even in the face of betrayal. The old rules of power and status and the rules of exchange – even the rules of purity¹⁰ – no longer apply. “This love cannot be stored. It cannot be saved up for a rainy day. It cannot be used later like leftovers. Love that is not passed on dies. [This] love is the power that binds us to God and one another.”¹¹

So this is the meaning of the ‘love command’ of Christ – and why we make an annual review in terms of our communal life together – for love that is not passed on, dies. Christ-like love gives itself away, however, producing an astonishingly rich harvest.¹²

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⁶ John 13:34

⁷ Revelation 21:5

⁸ Matthew 5:43-48

⁹ John 13:35

¹⁰ Acts 11

¹¹ John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p173.

¹² John 12:24