

20200616-Trinity-2

Proper 7 - Year A

Romans 6.1b-11

Matthew 10.24-39

In my more mischievous moments I have this thought that opposing religious leaders could be made to deny their own side by simply glueing together words from their various speeches in the wrong order; you could make it sound like the equivalent of re-touching a photograph.

And of course these days we are so much about how you sound or even how you look: all about optics and sound-bites.

You certainly could not accuse Our Lord of worrying about optics on the strength of today's Gospel reading; and indeed I wonder if our beloved Apostle Paul would have won a Plain English award for the Epistle to the Romans.

So much of our efforts today are about being accessible or being acceptable or intelligible Yet neither of these readings is any of those things.

Our Collect speaks of "that most excellent gift of love" and yet Our Lord is talking about setting families against themselves. But is that really what this is about? We know from the Epistles that, as Paul says, if anyone refuses to help

those in need in their own families, they are “worse than an unbeliever” and Jesus Himself spoke approvingly of the fourth commandment to honour one’s own father and mother.

Is it just confusing or is there something else going on? We are going through the Book of Numbers in our home group at the moment. As I mentioned to people last Thursday, it was once called something like ‘the junkyard of the bible’ because it is put together in a way that seems to jump easily from one topic to another as though its made-up of lots of little bits.

Of course God does not write junk so we have to look elsewhere for an explanation. The ancient rabbis spoke of the book moving from dark into light. And exactly at the junction between the dark bits and the bright bits, there is a story of extraordinary zeal being shown towards God; zeal at exactly the point in the national epic of the very young Jewish nation, where if they had been allowed to drift away from God and drift away following the example of their very own corrupt leaders, that there may not have ever been a salvation account in the way we now have it.

Of course in the UK we tend to frown on zeal a bit, unless it’s about football. Zeal is the blind passion which turns sensible people into robots perhaps; it speaks against a certain sensible balance or moderation. But then again many of us consider unconditional love of family a complete given; we are genuinely zealous in our love towards those closest to us. And certainly we would indeed frown on someone who told us that this was wrong; even if that someone was another family member: loyalty and devotion are a must if we are to

fulfil our duties towards those we nurture and care for. God's Spirit in us is witnessing to what Paul wrote about caring for family.

And it is that certain knowledge that we are doing the right thing when we love those closest to us, that Jesus I suspect is really talking about here. His desire is that having gone through the ultimate sacrifice of Calvary, we should not be drifting away and be thinking his efforts were in some way trivial; Christ wants us to engage with the reality of what He went through, so that we can understand the reality of His devotion to us. Similarly many of us love giving gifts, precisely to express our devotion to the one who receives.

Yes there is passion there, but passion with a purpose. Football is indeed a great game, but - forgive me - I doubt there is much purpose in the passion.

One of the subtleties in what Jesus is saying in our Gospel reading relates to the context in which it was said. Jesus was sending-out his disciples to preach about the Kingdom of God to all the "lost of Israel" as he calls them. In this context he wants to ensure that those he is sending out are properly equipped. These disciples need to be warned that life will not always be plain sailing; that people will oppose you at exactly the moment when you are doing good; that people will wilfully mis-interpret your best efforts: all things many of us will be familiar with. Above all he does not want his disciples to be afraid: "do not fear them", he says.

Instead we are to be steadfast in doing good and not to be diverted; keeping our eyes fixed upon Him.

And now we start to understand why Jesus says for example: "he who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me", not so that we can be disrespectful, but so that we can be resolute. I'll always remember someone close to me telling me not long before I was ordained that I "could always change my mind"; hardly an encouragement at such a time! And words like that could have pushed me in another direction. Equally when serving others, we some times have to keeping pressing-on in spite of the opposition.

The love Jesus is speaking about is not a mushy feeling, but a call to action. We will all remember in another place where he uses the analogy of someone turning back from ploughing as being unfit for service. It is also striking for example that Paul in the Romans reading does not question what it is that Jesus has achieved for each one of us: we are to walk in newness of life; we are to be united with Jesus in his resurrection; we are not enslaved to sin; we will indeed live with him. These are facts not feelings; they don't need discussion but action.

Of course people find it hard to argue with facts. Others will know we are Christians by how we act towards each other - this is our love of each other. Of course I can be made to say anything if enough words from enough sermons and talks are pieced together, but hopefully how I have acted, how each of us has acted, would surely prove that our love of each other and of Christ is not words but actions.

As we claw our way out of this present crisis, I am sure our steadfastness in continuing to do good, in continuing to bless all those whom God makes our 'neighbour' daily, will prove that Christ is indeed alive in our midst.