



Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 4 September 2011

The Commandment to Love

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Romans 13.8-end; Matthew 18.15-20

Last year, a young man from Afghanistan who had been baptised and confirmed as a Christian earlier in the year, had to go for an interview and a test by the UK border agency to see if they believed his conversion to Christianity was genuine as they made the decision whether he should be granted asylum in this country or be deported back to Afghanistan. “Can you tell us the ten commandments?” they asked him. He answered “In Christian we don’t have lots of commandments there is just two commandments, to love – Love God and love others as you love yourself.” His interviewer marked his answer wrong. He was then asked “Why did you become a Christian?” He answered that when he was growing up his mother was not treated as a full person. She was only seen as a half a person. She was cruelly treated and died young. “I became a Christian,” he said, “because in Christian everyone is a full person whoever they are. There are no half persons only equal persons.” He in his initial interview was marked wrong again for this answer. I think in the tick box he was expected to say that he became a Christian because Jesus died for his sins. I phoned him last night to ask if I could use this story today and to check that I had remembered his words correctly. “Yes, please use my words and I will feel so happy if they can help – because they are true. There are no half people in Christianity only human people whatever their race or colour, men and women – they are the same in God’s love.” He had of course grasped the greater truth at the heart of our faith, a truth which Paul in his epistle today also expresses to the Romans. Paul writes:

The commandments “You shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet”, are summed up in this word “Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

The story which precedes our Gospel reading today, also talks about this unequivocal love of God. We began reading at Chapter 18, verse 15, but Chapter 18 verses 10-15, tell the *Parable of the Lost Sheep*. If an inclusive Church needs to find scriptural support for its inclusiveness, then this parable provides support in spades or should I say sheep. If a shepherd had a hundred sheep and even one of them had gone astray he would leave the ninety-nine in order to look for the one who went missing. The parable celebrates the importance of the lost one brought back and restored into the community.

Paul himself had direct experience of the love which he preaches. He himself knew what it meant to be the recipient of God’s grace. In his meeting with Christ, Paul is confronted not by the law but by God’s grace, God’s free and unconditional love for him. He was going to spend the rest of his life proclaiming that love. But Paul is also a practical man and life together in community will need practical rules and moral discipline. His experience of God’s free grace doesn’t stop him in his epistles from including endless reprimands, exhortations and rules he believes these early Christian communities need to live by. St Augustine wrote “Love God and do what you like.” What he meant was that through the love of God you are converted at the roots as it were – if you really love how could you possibly hurt or steal or murder or blaspheme. But the fear of course has always been that you can’t regulate that love, if you let go of the laws and commandments how can you control what will happen? Society and indeed especially the Church has always had an innate fear of the love it proclaims and has often tried to bind it down.

As all of us know it is not easy to live together in community loving one's neighbour as oneself. I remember when I was living as a monk in the community of the Melanesian Brotherhood, visitors often used to say to us, "You brothers are such an example to us you seem to live together with such unity and peace." And I used to think "little do you know!" It is never easy and there are always difficulties and divisions, tensions, jealousies and rivalries when people live closely. It is not that we did not still recognise all that can spoil and divide, it was rather that we struggled to recognise and name that divisiveness and realise it was not of God, and let it go. True love of neighbour, of which Paul speaks, is costly love, love which costs Jesus his life. It is not a love which simply excuses all. Inclusive love does not mean that anything goes. All of us know how difficult Christ's love is to live out. Brother Roger of Taizé used to tell his monks that that community was total – it cost nothing less than everything. One of the Brothers told me of how once he had tested Brother Roger as a joke, taking a piece of cheese from his plate while he ate. "You have taken my cheese," said Brother Roger. "Ah yes, Brother Roger, but today you said that community was total." "Yes," said Brother Roger, "but community also respects the edge of my plate." His words are important. Community respects the space and humanity of the other. The business of living and dying with love for God and neighbour involves giving both oneself and someone else the space and the room to find one's connection with God. That needs trust. Whoever we live and share with, be it in the family or the workplace, there will be conflicts of interest and tensions between us.

Jesus, in the Gospel today, gives a very practical piece of teaching – a small periscope illustrating how division and conflict in a community should be addressed. The character of the method he encourages is compassionate, and proportionate and wise. If a member of the community offends or sins against you, go and speak to him individually. If the member does not listen, go to him again, this time with two or three witnesses to support you. But if again the person refuses to listen, then bring the matter to the whole church. If, after all these three stages, the person still refuses to listen, then they forfeit the right to be a part of the community. Our actions have consequences. One discerns in this teaching that the early Christian communities, like ourselves, were not infallible Christians and were just as prone as anybody else to divisiveness and sin. And yet Jesus calls them into this process of accountability and truthfulness. There is humility, and courage in this facing up to the wrongs and misunderstandings which divide us. There is also a call to address the injury we cause each other. This honesty is a respect both for our humanity and the humanity of the other.

This is simple practical advice for anyone living together. The need to heal our divisions and face up to our own capacity to hurt and wound others, be it in the family or the workplace, the communities to which we belong, or the church. If we cannot live together as a community ourselves what is the point of trying to teach others about the love of Christ? If we want to talk about and pray about the love of God in the Church then that love of God must also inform our relationships in the office, or supermarket, or the way we treat the person who bumps into us as we rush for the bus. If you want others to be reconciled you have to be reconciled with others yourself. This may sound very simple teaching, but how great the divisions when it is not heeded. We have seen in the Church itself what happens when sin is not addressed and when clerical abuse of power is covered up and denied. And we do not have to look far to see what happens when conflict and hatred is not resolved but allowed to fester and infect. In our lifetimes again and again our world has witnessed the horror of the inhumanity that we are all capable of. This week in Libya, we saw yet again the horror of mass graves and evidence of torture – a repeating horror of modern history. Neither can we present our own nation as virtuous. Have we not all been feeling somewhat sickened by the blatant fickle nature of our own national politics. How often an enemy becomes a trading partner and friend and then an enemy again. We bomb a nation to destroy the weapons, airports and infrastructure, and then prepare to take full advantage of the investment and building contracts opportunities that this destruction has opened up.

The next lines of our Gospel have always been contentious. "Truly I tell you whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." These words have traditionally been used to justify the power of the hierarchy and the authority of bishops

and priests – but could there not be another reading? Could not Christ be saying that this authority is given to all humanity? This choice of what to bind and what to liberate, to make the choice between the injustice that needs to be stopped, and the kingdom within all of us which needs to be set free? Could he not be saying that each one of us has been given responsibility not only for our own lives but the life of neighbour – the life of the wider community both here and in the life to come?

These choices are ours to make but we do not make them alone. Our Gospel ends with an incredible promise. Jesus says “when two or three are gathered in my name I am present in the midst.” Conflict must be bathed in prayer. In that process of prayer Christ is present at the very roots of life and choice. There at the core of our Christian calling is Christ, his Spirit of costly love for one another. For in our young Afghani friend’s words, “There are no half people in Christianity, only human people, whatever their race or colour, men and women – they are all equal in God’s love.”