

# Community of Practical Love

Readings: Leviticus 19: 13-18 Romans 12:9-21; Luke 10:25-37

When you move, as my family and I have done recently, you find lots of things that you haven't seen for ages. I saw amongst our many books a "Love is ..." Book. Do you remember that cartoon? A boy and a girl and a caption of "Love is ..." things like "... letting her eat your dessert." This book is of especial importance to me as it was given to me by George when I was 18 and she was sweet 16. This might lead you to go "Aahh" and think that love is keeping such a book.

But love is... what? Love in our society, it seems, is tied at best to romance which unfortunately usually simply means sex. More philosophically, love has to do with the self it is about our feelings, being true to ourselves and our happiness. Our stories and movies all show that this is what our culture believes.

But what about us? How often do you think about love, and what it is to love?

Our reading today from Romans 12:9-21 is a great passage to start thinking about what love really is as it seriously challenges our society's thinking about love. For here it is clear that love is not about how we feel but how we think and how we act. We are told that love is to be sincere, discerning, joyful, patient, humble, and to forsake revenge. Part of what love is then is in the mind, we need to think to love properly. But there is also a practical aspect, prayer, sharing, hospitality, associating with all manner of people, even doing good to our enemies.

Love then will be acted out, be visible and be for the benefit of others rather than ourselves. Love is not about feeling good but doing good. Love is not about ourselves but about others. Love is not even about being with the people you love, but loving the people you are with.

As we consider what it is to be a community of practical love then we may need to have our mind transformed about love, and our mind transformed to see that love is not an optional extra in the Christian life. Then our actions will need to be transformed into practical love. And what will transform us is the mind blowing love of God.

## THE BASIS OF PRACTICAL LOVE ROMANS 12:1-2

### In View of God's Mercy

Our reading from Romans is part of a section where Paul is calling on his readers to be transformed by the renewal of their mind. The sincere practical love that we are to show is, according to the start of the chapter, "In view of God's mercy ..." God's mercy, his steadfast love is what is to motivate, inspire and energise our practical. God's mercy is also Paul's short hand way of summarising the argument of Roman's so far.

What is the nature of this great mercy or steadfast love? Back in Romans 5:8-10 Paul has said this "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

There are two extraordinarily hard truths to grasp here, firstly what is said about us and then what is said about God.

We are described as sinners, facing God's wrath, indeed God's enemies. I am sure that most of us think that really we are quite lovely really, that we have many admirable qualities, and while that may be true the Bible wants us to understand how we look from God's point of view. We do not worship him and follow him as we should, we turn away from him and go our own way and so we are sinners, facing wrath, his enemies.

But this is what makes what is said about God so extraordinary, he shows his love by acting to save us in Jesus Christ, despite the fact we are his enemies. We tend to love people who are loveable, in whom we see something we like. Yet this is not so with God. God does not love us because we are lovely, because of something in us he wants to be near, it is because of his nature and his desire to save us. When God's word tells us to love our enemies it is nothing less than what God has already done in loving us and sending Jesus to die for us. This is what love is.

Now because God's love for us is not centred on us but on God's loving nature as shown in Jesus, it is absolutely secure. That is why Paul can famously go on in Romans 8:38-39 to say "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Here we see the mercy and love of God in all its wonder and glory, an eternal love to people who do not deserve it. This is the love that God pours into our hearts by his Holy Spirit. If we are to love as the Bible calls us to we must first understand and be grasped by this love shown to us in Jesus. It is this great reconciling, saving, eternal, generous, merciful love that is the foundation, which we are to have in view and which will transform our minds.

### **Offer your bodies**

Paul continues that our response to such love is that we should offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Now this may come as a bit of a surprise to us, and it would have come as a surprise to his readers as well.

Firstly it would have come as a surprise to his Greek readers who looked down on the body and all that was material, all that really mattered was the spirit, things of the mind, but Paul says no, God wants our bodies.

The Jews would have been equally surprised by the language that is used here, "sacrifice", "holy", "pleasing to God", would have reminded them of sacrifice in the temple and all the ritual that went with it. Paul is saying that is no longer how you worship, how you respond to God's love. It is to be with your very self.

These challenges remain. Many today consider religion or spirituality to be an inner thing, a private matter which has little impact on the way we live. There are others who think that it is all about ritual, doing the correct religious duties, going to church is the way to worship God. This verse says "No" to both.

We worship God with our whole lives in the rough and tumble of life. Eugene Petersen has written a paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* and he captures the idea of this verse well. "Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering." Our response is going to be practical, and it is going to be inspired by God's love.

This means that we worship God by the way that we deal with people in our relationships. The way that we relate with our spouses, our children, our parents, our friends, our neighbours is part of how we worship God. Now that is a challenging thought! The heart of worship is not what we do in here, in this building, when let's face it we are usually on somewhere near our best behaviour, it is outside of here that we truly worship, it is how we are in our relationships.

So as we look at the list of what love is like, genuine, looking for the good, showing each other honour, contributing to the needs of others, being hospitable, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, living in humble harmony with each other. In these very practical physical acts is our spiritual act of worship.

Now I am well aware that there are people here who have very painful and broken relationships, and have been hurt. But even then how we deal with this is part of offering our whole lives to God. This chapter talks about blessing those who curse you and trying as far as it is possible to live at peace with everyone.

I have been particularly challenged this week how this applies to how we talk to and about each other. At the clergy conference I and the rest of the staff were at this week we looked in detail at 1Peter and I was struck by the injunctions to love. For instance: "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart." (1Peter 1:21) What will this look like? A few verses later Peter says "Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander." (1Peter 2:1). All issues of the way we speak.

I believe that this is an issue that we particularly need to consider at the Cathedral. Do we speak to praise each other, to build each other up. The most common reason that people leave churches is that they feel unappreciated. Now I am not saying this because I am feeling a bit down and I want everyone to be nice to me at the door. I do want to ask because it so important, how do we talk to each other?

In view of God's mercy we need to have our minds and our tongues transformed. We are not to be conformed to the ways of this world, we need to keep coming back to the loving example of God as seen in Jesus, so that our thinking will be transformed leading to actions of practical love.

### **The Teaching of Jesus**

It is interesting that almost every idea in this section of Romans can be traced back to the example of Jesus. He also taught that we need to re think what love is and then get on with doing it.

Earlier this year I was reading the parable of the Good Samaritan. This very well known parable is told because a religious lawyer wants to know the right definition of "neighbour" whom he is to love, he wants to get his thinking right. Jesus tells the shocking story of the uncaring religious leaders and practical love shown by the detested Samaritan. But I had never really caught the force of finale. Having challenged the lawyer to consider the all embracing nature of who a neighbour was, Jesus doesn't say "That is the way you are to think", but rather "Go and do likewise". At its heart this is not a parable about changing just our mind set but about changing our behaviour.

From beginning to end of the Scripture the practical love is to be at the heart of God's people, as Paul will say later in Romans, picking up both Old Testament teaching and Jesus words, love of neighbour is the way to fulfil all the commandments. Practical love is not an optional extra in the Christian life.

Why is love so important? Partly it is because it is the right response to the love that God has shown us, but also because God's desire is to create a community that reflects his nature, and through this community to proclaim his nature. Church attendance, Bible knowledge, beautiful music or prayer are wonderful things but not the way that people, nor they way the world will know we are Jesus' disciples. This will happen by our love.

The idea of community is key to our mission statement, it is not just the result of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus but it supports the proclamation. Indeed without a community of living faith, profound hope and practical love the proclamation will be hollow. As Nietzsche said "If you want me to believe in your saviour you will have to look a lot more saved."

We need to look like, to behave like an outcrop of heaven on earth. To a world that in so many ways has lost its sense of community this will be a beacon of hope.

### **THE NECESSITY OF PRACTICAL LOVE**

Having looked at these verses we have started to have our thinking about love changed. But I hope that we will also have our thinking about the Christian faith challenged. It is so easy for us to think of love as an extra to the faith or perhaps something that other people are good at. Here we have seen that love, practical love, flows from a living faith in the love of God shown in Jesus. In other words it is impossible for a community of living faith not to be a community of practical love.

Now whilst this is a challenge to us it is also good news because transformation will come from our faith, not from guilt. You see I could end this sermon by asking "Is your love sincere, do you honour others above yourself, do you practice hospitality, how do you talk about others." And there may be a place for issuing that challenge. But it doesn't help us change.

How are we to change? Remember it comes from a living faith, which means that such a change comes from proclaiming who Jesus is, that he is the one who shows us the love of God. As we are presented with Christ, reminded of his sacrifice, we see that here is love as vast as the ocean, then God's love will come alive in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Preaching Christ will build a community of practical love for the more we grasp the extraordinary and saving love that God has shown us in Jesus the better equipped we are to go and DO likewise.