

'Love talk': sermon for Easter 3 by Mark Pilgrim

How many different ways are there for someone to tell another 'I love you'? When children are young – as Max is – parents express their love in all sorts of different ways. They surround their children with the best possible environment – a loving home, a warm house, bright and colourful toys, a pushchair that looks like it was designed by an space engineer – and, if the wheels are big enough, can bump across the Downs at a fast trot pushed by a person with white wire coming out of their ears! That's definitely one way to make sure the child gets very fresh air!

I wonder if Max has any pet or nicknames yet – longer or more complicated than the short and straightforward 'Max' by which he tends to be known at the moment – though presumably it's 'Maxwell' when he's been naughty? Dreaming up pet names is one way we express love and treasure people. For some reason which I can't now remember, my wife and I began to call our youngest child Letty, when she was a babe in arms... 'Widge'. What started as 'widgey widgey woo' baby talk morphed into plain 'Widge' – and stuck as a loving pet name for the first two or three years of her life!

I myself have experienced this. My father used to call me not Mark but 'Parker' for some reason – perhaps linked to the Rolls-Royce driving chauffeur called Parker in Thunderbirds, if that means anything to you... and another alternative to Mark someone else called me was the Latin and far longer 'Marcus Aurelius'!

That it's possible to say 'I love you' in very different ways is also clear in the novel I am reading at the moment. Jodi Picoult's 'Handle with Care', a moving book about the traumatic lengths a mother will go to help her daughter with ultra-fragile bones, has the father courting his wife with lots of verbal expressions of 'I love you' but the wife, Charlotte, refusing to say the three words but expressing her love – and wanting him to accept it – through the cakes and goodies she slips into his belongings for him to find later, whenever they are together.

So, moving on from asking 'How many ways are there to say 'I love you'', let's ask this question: How many different ways are there for God to say 'Follow me'? We've had a picture of two of them in our readings this morning.

In the first, Paul has the original Damascus Road experience. He's going about his business when he is stopped in his tracks. The first words he hears, according to the account, are his regular Jewish name: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' The voice of the Risen Lord identifies itself, saying 'I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. But get up and enter Damascus and you will be told what to do'. In other words: despite all you are doing against me, here are some positive instructions. Follow them.

In the second account, Peter, after the Resurrection, has returned to his regular business – what he knows best: fishing. But again, like Paul, he is stopped in his tracks. Again a voice Peter instantly recognises says, with infinite familiarity and compassion: 'Children... (imagine being one of a crew of tough, professional, sweaty fishermen and being addressed as 'Children' – who except someone very brave or exceptionally well-known to them would dare to do such a thing?). You have no fish, have you? Do as I say now – follow my instructions.'

They follow Jesus's instructions then and thereafter – and the rest is history. Christianity – and most importantly, because the Christian community has its problems, the presence of the Risen Christ – changes and transforms the world.

The affirmations from Peter of love for and loyalty to Christ that we hear in the reading are met with encouragement and instructions from Christ for Peter to act: Feed, and tend – nurture and see many people grow as followers of Christ.

So here we are today. We gather together and welcome Max into the now worldwide community of people who see Jesus Christ as God's complete revelation of himself in the world; we seek God's guidance, mediated continually by the Holy Spirit, for Max and for ourselves. We will pray soon for Max, his family, each other and for difficult situations around the world. And we seek, in our own flawed and frail ways, as a group and as individuals,

both to follow Christ and to nurture others in the fullness of life which we believe Christian faith offers – as Peter and Paul did in their own sometimes strongly contrasting ways.

It's important to emphasise again: both Peter and Paul meet the Risen Christ in our readings as they are going about their regular, day to day business. When these incidents happen they aren't looking to follow Jesus at all. Paul, in fact, is looking to wipe out this new sect which threatens Pharisaic tradition. Peter seems to be ignoring Jesus' exhortation to go out and fish for people and bring them into a fuller and deeper experience of God's grace and kingdom. Far from following Jesus' instruction to fish for people, he's playing safe and walking in the opposite direction – and encouraging his and Jesus' companions to do the same – by going back to fishing for fish.

But, as we noted earlier, the Risen Christ stops both people in their tracks. Peter and Paul both encounter God in their own context. Both are addressed personally, familiarly and tenderly by God: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' ... 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?'

Each person is seen by God as being capable of being someone different, of doing and behaving differently – to the extent that, early on, Simon, son of John, is name changed to Peter the Rock by Jesus – and Saul is transformed by one letter into Paul.

The same people but two different trajectories. Peter and Paul are met tenderly by God in their own contexts, in their regular lives, doing what they routinely do. And the course they are invited to take, the trajectory their lives then follow is new but not alien.

God, through the Risen Christ, is inviting Peter to use his netting and organising skills to lead, gather and nurture the nascent Christian community. And God, through the Risen Christ, then invites Paul to turn his preaching and teaching skills completely around so that he doesn't destroy the nascent Christian community but becomes perhaps the most effective and influential witness to Christ in the community's whole history.

This pattern has, I suggest, these three implications for us.

It means, first, that, like Peter and Paul, we should look out for and not be surprised if we are aware of God's presence, of God addressing us as we go about our daily routines and regular business. It might be in our work time, if we are at work: it might be as we are driving the car, brushing our teeth or having a cup of coffee with someone. Wherever we are, God is with us.

Secondly it means, like Peter and Paul, though the direction God wants us to go is with the grain of who we are, encountering the Risen Christ will have a radical effect on the direction and nature of the rest of our lives. Responding to God's call to follow Jesus' instructions, our lives will take different and unexpected paths. Like Peter and Paul, we will go to places we didn't expect to go: we will do things we don't expect now to do. We will become the people we don't expect but God knows we can be. Some of us, like Peter and Paul, might even change our names – as Jorge Bergoglio has done recently on moving from a small flat in Buenos Aires and, taking the name Francis, moving to another flat as Pope and Bishop of Rome.

The third and final implication of this pattern is that we can see and celebrate God communicating with the people of his creation personally and tenderly. As we saw when we started, there are so many different, authentic ways to say 'I love you'. You can simply say the words. You can cook them. You can try to provide an environment which shows and encourages love. You can find pet and new names that express love intimately and personally. So, I want to say: as it was with Peter and Paul, so it is with us – with me, with you and with Max. God revealed in Jesus Christ is with us in the routine of our lives and is addressing us personally and intimately, first with the words 'I love you' and then with the words: 'Follow me – do as I do.'

'Follow me – worship God revealed in Christ through the power of his Spirit. And fulfil your potential as a child of God for extending God's kingdom in the world.'

Will you?