

Sermon 22 June 2014.

Romans 6:1b-11 and Matthew 10:24-39

20 years ago, when I lived in Leicester, I answered a ring on the doorbell to see my next door neighbour Milka standing there. We usually just chatted over the garden wall, but today she had come to the front door. She was distraught. I couldn't make out what she was saying through her tears. Her first language wasn't English but normally we managed fine. I knew Milka as a very hard working woman. She was employed in one of the hospitals as a cleaner. She had a deep laugh and tried to find humour in most things. She was from Yugoslavia. The reason for her distress was the news that fighting had started in what we now know as Croatia and that her sisters and their families in rural villages were caught up in it. But for Milka, it wasn't just the immediate fear for her families' safety that was causing her anguish, she was also angry that this infighting was happening again. She had been a child in the second world war and had witnessed atrocities then – when Christian and Muslim had been played off against each other. 'How can this have happened? Don't they remember?' was what she kept saying.

So much of what we watch and read about the news has little immediate impact on us. It can be easy to become removed from it, we can be saddened, shocked, angered and bewildered but our lives continue with our own concerns. We live safe in the knowledge that water will come out of the tap, the bus will arrive if we have enough patience, we will have choices about what we eat, wear and how we entertain ourselves and how we worship. It seems permanent, but in other places, that seeming permanence has become fragile.

We are blessed in many ways. We can only live the lives we have been given. We should live them well, to the best of our ability. If we are seeking relationship with God, then we also need to be mindful of the relationships we have with one another. Milka had a very simple approach. The power of the gun was not the way to build trust or to build communities that could forgive past hurts. She would have us remember the sorrow, to remember how it felt to be betrayed and to lose those you love, and through remembering to never want that to happen again. That chimes with both our readings and can, I think, be applied to our softer, easier way of life.

We have just finished a season of what we have called Participation Eucharists, where the services have been led not just by those who are either ordained or licenced. I particularly liked the approach taken at Candlemas when a group led by Peter Chambers asked questions about the readings and offered interpretations. So, I asked a few people to read the passages from Romans and from Matthew's gospel and give me some questions. I wasn't brave enough or clever enough to do this off the cuff in the service! They also gave me some reflections too. One mentioned something that brought back my memories of sitting and grieving with Milka.

So, thinking about how we live to the best of our ability and our relationship with God, I was struck by the very first part of the Romans reading. Should we keep on sinning so that God can keep on forgiving? Or in the words you have on the sheet, should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? God's grace is a wonderful thing, many of us will know the amazing sense of wellbeing that brings. But can we really hurt others just to get that feel good feeling? That doesn't sound quite right somehow and Paul says that is not only a wrong assumption but asks how can we even think that? We can't say that it doesn't matter what we do, we are obliged to live lives of love, hope and sacrifice, but we do so in response to God's love, and not in an attempt to be loved by God.

Of my small panel of readers, three people honed in on the verses linking our baptism with Christ's death. One admitted to revising their view of total immersion, having first thought it overly dramatic, but now recognising the value of the symbolism. It encapsulates death and resurrection. The going down into the water (which can be dangerous and needs trust on the part of the one

being baptised) and then the rising out of the water, coming back to life. Another reflected on the word 'cleave', that has two meanings – and how through baptism we are cleaved (joined) to Christ and consequently cleaved (separated) from sin and death. Another got the meaning, but found the language very difficult. When I find the meaning opaque I often have a look at The Message, and in this case, the language is made much simpler. It concludes by saying – be alive to God.

So, if we are to try to be alive to God, to seek out the ways in which we can prevent patterns of the past dragging us down, how does the reading from Matthew help us with that?

My 'panel' came up with a few things.

We won't always get it right. It's as if, in the same way as a parent has to let their children go out and make their own mistakes whilst keeping an eye on them to protect them from any real or lasting danger, so too Jesus is telling his disciples – just do it! That's what we should do – be brave, be bold, and expect that God will protect and guide us. For after all Jesus says that he knows us better than any parent knows their child.

We may probably struggle to put God before those we love, while finding it perhaps a bit easier to give up our own selfish needs for the needs of others. And there are many passages in the New Testament about caring for your family. It's surely not an injunction to neglect those for whom you are responsible in order to devote your time to 'doing the Lord's work'. But it does mean that allegiance to Jesus should be at the top of your list.

And then the big question – why are verses 34-36 included? (The part about – I have come to set a man against his father and so on)

Did you know that Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament book of Micah here? Micah uses it to show that terrible divisions happen whenever God is doing a new thing. And of course Jesus rescuing God's people is a totally new way of looking at life. There will be those who say they don't want rescuing, that life is plenty comfortable already thank you. What Jesus is doing here is reminding the disciples that divisions will happen. It's the way of life. Think of the way we react to change. We find innovation difficult. Sometimes it's very exciting. It can be very divisive. And Jesus is describing the ways that families react to it. Well, the Christian community is a family. We should be careful of the various communities we belong to. They need to be loved but not stifled. Given room to grow, develop and change. Let's remember the experience Milka had and her fear about the way that the past shapes the present when old resentments are not dealt with.

I didn't hear Emma Langley preach a few weeks ago. The opening words of the passage from Matthew reminded one person of her sermon. Teachers may say that they succeed when their pupils get better than them. Matthew is saying that we will never be better than Jesus, our teacher. But Jesus gave us a commission – to take up his work for him. Jesus valued relationships. May God bless us as we seek to live in response to God's love.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 22 June 2014.