

'Love Gives' – St. Peter's 2015 Stewardship Initiative
8th February – 'Love gives: committedly'
Preacher: Ian Love

It must now be more than twenty years ago now since a fresh faced young wannabe by the name of Michael Ball came to fame with a ballad entitled 'Love Changes Everything'. The opening words are:

'Love, love changes everything, Hands and faces, earth and sky,
 Love, love changes everything, How to live and how to die.

It finishes with 'Nothing in this world can ever be the same'.

It was harmless enough, and was in the charts for quite some time. I have even had it requested at a funeral service. So powerful in its way, both as regards the lyrics and the singer's voice. It might even be regarded as a sounding board for our thought today. Love is indeed a powerful emotion and manifests itself in many ways. No surprise then that the term is used as the base for this short series of addresses at our Eucharistic services. As the title suggests love is primarily about giving. To offer something with an expectation of something in return is not true love. True love is the giving of ourselves **unconditionally**. We have to believe in what we are doing, we have to be committed to it for it to have any real worth.

However expressions of love are not always pleasurable. Parents can find themselves in positions where they have to chasten or remonstrate with their children. Not because they wish to be cruel to them, but to instil principles of what is acceptable and what is not. These are usually for the sake of their ultimate safety and well-being. At the other end of the scale there is the task of telling a loved one that they cannot remain or return to their home by virtue of their frailty, and the time has come for them to move into permanent care. It is psychologically demanding enough when the person agrees and is accepting of the situation. How much more stressful it is when they resist or even refuse to accept the position.

St. Peter's is facing a challenging time in the months ahead, and over the next few years. Amongst the issues which will test our love and commitment to the full.

- (i) The Church heating system
- (ii) Improvements to facilities e.g. link to Hall and refreshment facilities in church
- (iii) Bringing in new people
- (iv) Reverse the current downward trend in income

To make progress with these tasks, or any other requires people. People who can and will offer their time, their skills and their money for the furtherance of the work of God in this place. That is what stewardship is about – the harnessing and management of resources, that is our God's given talents. That, in turn, requires organisation and self discipline and, of course, commitment. They go hand in hand. St. Peter's has had the benefit of the services of many talented and willing people in the past, indeed still have in a number of key roles. There is always a need for more to share the work load. From where are they likely to be found? The demands of job positions nowadays seem far greater than they once were resulting in a significant reduction in the amount of available time for matters beyond the immediate needs of the family. Add into the equation school related and sports activities now regularly programmed for Sunday mornings and the position becomes more clear and understandable.

A further challenge to us is the current level of giving. Let it be understood, I have never had access to the Parish's financial records, nor do I need to. However I understand that in the past there has been a significant number of members who have given very generously, but who have now passed away. Perhaps, therefore, this is an opportune time for us all to re-assess our financial contributions. The level at which it should be has always been a difficult area on which to make any meaningful suggestion. Whilst 5% of net income after fixed outgoings might be a reasonable starting point, so much depends on what is included. Mortgages, loans and household utilities have to be covered obviously, but what is included in the calculations thereafter is down to us as individuals. Circumstances vary so widely that it must, in the end, depend on the level of priority we set for our giving. The cost of a holiday or replacement furniture for example. Should the funding of such items come before or after we calculate our giving? It really does come down to our personal sense of commitment.

Acts of public worship. My memories of the early 1950's are that the main church service was an early Sunday evening service of the Word. Communion, whilst held every Sunday was more commonly attended on a monthly basis. Then along came updates of the liturgy with Series 2 and later, Common Worship which we have today which placed a greater importance/significance of the Eucharist. Weekly attendance moved to the mornings such as we have here at St. Peter's. It appeals to those of us 'of a certain age' but can we say with confidence that it is a pattern which will remain unchanged. For many it is the highlight of the week as it affords the opportunity to contribute to the worship through the singing and corporate reciting of the creed and prayers. But do we do it out of habit because we have always done it? The danger can be that our attendance can descend into a meaningless repeat of ritual devoid of most of its meaning merely because of the frequency with which we go through the routine. Should we reach that stage, then we have to question whether there is much point in turning out. That would be sad indeed. In fact it would be considerably more than 'sad' for it would indicate that our commitment, yes that word again, our commitment to God had been weakened to such an extent as to become worrying close to abandonment. Many times I have made mention of what I see as a danger of allowing adherence to traditions to blinker our perception for the need for something more than what we have offered in the past. We are currently addressing this issue by the provision of the 'Horizon' service at 4pm on Sundays, a time which, it is perceived, will appeal to a section of society in a way that mid-morning will not. It is a serious attempt to reach out spiritually to the people of Henleaze who have found the formal style of the existing services too restrictive. Certainly there are people attending whose faces hitherto have been unknown to us. Surely this is an encouraging sign. Whether it is sustainable on a weekly basis only time will tell. To offer it at any other frequency would present its own set of uncertainties.

You may feel that I am spreading a message of doom and gloom. Not necessarily but I will put my hand up to throwing out a challenge or two. Whilst some of us relish challenges and respond to them enthusiastically, others require some form of encouragement. This is where our scripture readings help with the position we find ourselves in at this time. On the face of it, the gospel passage set for today sits somewhat uncomfortably with that. We may feel that because we recognise the passage; it being the text of the ninth lesson at pre Christmas Carol Services. The prologue as it is sometimes termed. This passage reveals to us everything that is true about the nature of God, how Jesus meets us in flesh and invites us to enter a new experience of intimacy with God as his own children. It illustrates the extent of the love of God through the presence of Jesus in human form. God's commitment to us is total and that in turn requires our commitment to him. No bad thing at the start of our Stewardship Initiative. An opportunity to clear the decks, so to speak, and look at our commitment to St. Peter's with a fresh eye.

Stewardship is, in its purest sense, the harnessing and management of resources. The resources God provides for us, which we are charged to develop using the skills he has bestowed on each one of us. Being able to meet together for worship without fear of interference is indeed a joy and huge privilege. A time when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices. How will we be expressing our committed love for St. Peter's in the light of present circumstances?. May it be a matter of serious thought and prayer as we consider the scope of our involvement with, and commitment to God through St. Peter's in the rapidly changing world of which we are all part.

As Michael Ball sang 'Nothing in this world can ever be the same', so may we embrace the opportunities the changed world offers and respond to them in a spirit of love; God's love and do so committedly. AMEN