

12 August 2018 – John 6:41-51, Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

AIM: From what influences do you find your nourishment?

Last week 4 million people watched the final of the reality TV series Love Island. For those who don't know, this is a television series in which 13 young people spent time in Majorca in the hope of finding love and, arguably more importantly, fame and fortune. I watched one episode for about 5 minutes to see what all the fuss was about and decided quite quickly that this wasn't for me. The final may have passed me by completely, but for the fact that it made news headlines for a couple of days during which I was introduced to the concept of an "Influencer."

An influencer is a marketing term for someone who can affect the buying power of others because of his or her relationship with an audience. The popularity of this programme, particularly amongst young people, means that many people are interested in what the contestants are doing, eating, buying or wearing. Advertisers are willing to pay vast amounts of money every time they post something on social media. This started me thinking about where we look for influence in our lives?

We are all influenced by our past experiences and relationships with those around us. My background research into Love Island and Influencer marketing is based on online news reports from the Guardian and the Independent as those are the websites I trust. I will be more likely to pick up a book or watch a film recommended by someone I know has similar tastes. We all have friends, whose opinions we value and seek when we have difficult decisions to make.

For me influence is connected to trust and is founded on a relationship, built over time and sustained by experience. Jesus himself, was an influencer, particularly to his disciples whom he taught through spending time and building relationships with them during his ministry. When the first disciples met Jesus, they wanted to find out more about him. Jesus response to their questions was, "Come and see." In his book "Being Disciples", Rowan Williams describes the role of a disciple like this.

"The disciples don't just listen, they are expected to *look* as well. They are people who are picking up clues all the way though."

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, encourages us to make changes in our lives appropriate to being followers of Christ. He gives guidance on how to speak, how to behave and even how to feel, instructing us to put aside, bitterness, anger and malice. Paul says we should be "Imitators of God", kind to one another, tender hearted and forgiving.

Kindness may not be one of the main characteristics you think of to describe God. It seems a bit insipid for the awesome and powerful creator of the cosmos. Yet Tom Wright refers to kindness as one of the purest forms of the imitation of God. He says,

"How would it be if God were the kind of god who was always making snide remarks at us? What would worship and prayer be like if we thought God had been talking about us behind our backs, putting us down to others? How would we feel if we couldn't trust God to tell us the truth, if he was always losing his temper with us? Well: how do people feel about us if that's what we're like? Wouldn't it be better in every way to be like God?"

Kindness, it seems to me, involves going above and beyond what is required. We are to imitate the abundance of the creator God who pours life, love and grace into his creation. Thieves are to give up stealing and find ways to share with those who are needy. Not only are we to stop saying bad things, but we are to actively encourage and build up others through the things we say. We are to fill our lives with love so as not to leave any room for evil to take hold in negative thoughts and feelings.

So how can we go about imitating God? Paul says we should do so “as dearly beloved children.”

Last week my husband Ewan was amused when my 17-year-old son made himself a boiled egg. Not only had he made soldiers to go with it, but he had arranged them around the edge of the plate with the egg in the centre. When he told me, I just laughed, commenting that our son had made a sunshine, like I used to do for him when he was little.

Our children can imitate us in many ways. Not only in how we present our food, but how we talk, how we move, our expressions and lifestyle choices. How many times have you heard a child say something and know that it is copied from a parent? How often have you caught yourself doing or saying something exactly like your own parents?

If we are to be imitators of God we need to spend time with Him, we need to “grow up” with Him and get to know Him. Like the disciples with Jesus, we need to pick up on the clues, going deeper, learning a little more with each and every encounter. This is a life long journey and, as with any journey, one through which we will need to be fuelled and sustained.

We can be helped on this journey through our relationship with Jesus, a human being who was God’s son, the bread of life, the means through which we are sustained. The nourishment provided by a relationship with him, brings us closer to God. In our Gospel reading, Jesus explains how God works through him to grow his people.

Jesus rebukes his contemporaries who see only the human part of him. Who see him just as the son of Mary and Joseph. He refers back to the prophets where it is written that all people will be taught by God. The prophet Jeremiah described a new covenant when knowledge of God will be available to all not through learning or scholarship, but because God is in their hearts. (Jer 31:33-34).

This covenant has been made through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, something which Jesus refers to towards the end of the passage.

This covenant is built on love and sacrifice.

Unlike manna, which temporarily sustained their forefathers in the wilderness, the nourishment found in a relationship with Jesus leads to eternal life.

Love Island, despite its name, has nothing to do with love. It glorifies the pursuit of fame and fortune and equates love with sex. We may think we know these people, through seeing them on television or because they post photographs on Instagram or Facebook. But this is not how you get to know someone. It’s no basis upon which to trust their judgement and allow them to influence your life. I find it hard to believe that true love can thrive in these conditions.

Love is not something to be “found” on an island. It is something to be given and received. John explores this in his first epistle,

This is how God shows his love among us: He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4: 9-10)

Wherever else we look for influence, guidance and support, and there are many places to which we turn, this is the bottom line. Everything we say, do or even think should be measured against this. By following Christ, imitating God and submitting to his influence, we journey through life, sustained, nourished and growing into the people God wants us to be.

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