

Sermon 3 September 2017: Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 16:21-28

The Beatles sang: All you need is love, love is all you need. The two greatest commandments are: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength; and Love your neighbour as yourself. Paul writes to the people in Rome: Let your love be genuine, be devoted to one another in love.

Jesus tells us to pick up our cross and follow him.

How does an instrument of torture, of death, of capital punishment, fit into a gospel of love?

What was it that Jesus said, that Peter didn't hear?

Jesus said he would go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised. Peter probably stopped listening at 'be killed'. If he did hear the last bit, he wouldn't have understood it. He wouldn't have understood it until he saw the empty tomb, saw Jesus walk into the upper room, ate the fish that Jesus had cooked on the beach for him or received from Jesus the commission to make disciples of all nations.

We live in post resurrection times. We can respond to Jesus' challenge to pick up our cross and follow him, knowing that within that challenge there is abundant life. We don't need to focus on just the suffering and death part. There is life, abundant life, that comes from following Jesus.

If we hear only the suffering and death part we will live a safe life, but a scared life. We will be cautious, wary of change and of strangers and we won't really enjoy it as much as we could. Jesus warns that anyone who would save their life will lose it. We only have one life, we need to live it.

I can't deny that Jesus warns about suffering if we follow him. But in this country and in this sort of area in Bristol, the most that is likely to add up to is to be some ridicule or someone thinking you are nuts. That's not such a great price to pay is it? I think that a lot of things other people do are nuts. I've never seen the attraction of wind surfing for example, yet I have one colleague who loves it almost as much as he loves his children, at times even more.

Jesus' invitation is to follow him into life, not into death.

I've been talking about risk with a few people at work this week. And one, coming to the end of his working life, wonders if he has been too risk averse. Has he settled for safety, stayed in jobs too long? Should he have persevered when the going got tough rather than go back to somewhere he had left? And I think he concluded that he counted the cost too much and probably missed out and there's some regret there. Regret that he had counted his comfort and safety too highly. He described it as having wasted his life.

For God doesn't count our comfort and safety very highly. What he wants is for us to live our lives, to look at the quality of our lives, the depth of them, the scope of them. We have to lose our lives to live them. We have to let go of our fears. You could say it's a bit like learning to swim. We could simply splash about in the shallow end, but if we continue to walk down the pool, we soon get to the point where we have the choice, swim or drown. Swimming is the best option.

And he wants us to live lives of love. To be profligate with love, not to be stingy.

And when I say 'love' I don't mean those warm fuzzy feelings. For the sort of love that is in the Commandments and the sort of love that Paul is talking about is a decision, not a feeling. If we wait until we are ready to love others, we will never be ready, we will wait for ever. We may also wait for ever to love ourselves.

Don't let's wait until we are ready, or give up if the going gets tough. Make a conscious decision to practice loving each other. A simple practical thing. It can be just saying hello. Ian Love, at the thanksgiving service for Vera Stone this week, suggested asking the name of someone you don't know. We don't have to have in depth conversation with each other or embark on a deep exegesis of your faith with a stranger; 'hello who are you', or 'you've told me your name I can't remember it', is a good start. The in depth conversations have to start with getting to know you.

Paul says let your love be genuine, be sincere, be real. That means be practical. The Bible version we use says: 'contribute to the needs of the saints', other versions put it like this: 'contribute to the needs of God's people' or 'help needy Christians' or 'share with God's people who are in need'.

We can do that within this church community, always looking out for those who may need our help. And for that to work properly we all ought also to be ready to accept help. There can be an arrogance in refusing to be helped. Recognising our vulnerability and need is part of living life to the full.

We can do that in the wider community too. I'll give you two examples, one in Bristol and one in Uganda. You probably already know where you commit your giving, both money and time, but if not, maybe these will inspire you. I commend to you the local Sisters of the Church based in St Pauls who have been feeding needy people for a long time, both literally and spiritually. They have been running a food bank before food banks were really heard of. They can always use gifts: of people giving their time to help, of food and of money to buy extra food. And I commend to you an initiative we in St Peters have run since 2003, supporting young people through secondary school in Northern Uganda, mainly youngsters who have lost one or both parents. We call it the Peter Fund, named after its first recipient, Peter. We currently support 26 students. We have just enough money to support that number for another year, maybe two years. If anyone would like to know more please read the new report which is at the back of the church and talk to me or Ricky and Judy Winn. It's really heartening to see how, in a place that has been so scarred by internal warfare, by fear of abduction, of lives shattered, that we have been able to support children who have gone on to become engineers, teachers, administrators or farmers, helping to rebuild communities.

Paul asks us to live peaceably with each other and not to seek revenge. That is God's job, not ours.

I went to a fabulous talk at Greenbelt last weekend (among a number of other fabulous talks). For those of you who haven't heard of her or used her cookery books, Jack Monroe is one of the real life figures who inspired Ken Loach to write the film: 'I, Daniel Blake'. She spoke movingly and horrifically about the reality of poverty in this country from her own experience and when asked what we could do about it, answered 'be kind'. She sees that there is an unkindness towards those in need. And isn't the practice of kindness just the sort of thing Paul means when he asks us to make our love sincere?

And so the cross that Christ asks us to pick up is one that leads us to live our lives fully, to live our lives loving our God and loving our neighbour. Not to seek our own comfort, not to be cautious but to be profligate with our lives, our gifts, our talents, our time and our love.

Amen

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