

SERMON for Easter 6 – May 14th, 2023.

Readings: Acts 17: 22-31; Psalm 66: 7-19; 1 Peter 3: 8-22; John 14: 15-21.

Do the words: “We endeavour to be an expression of God’s love in the community” ring any bells with anyone?

If you hadn’t already spotted it or are familiar with it, it is our Parish Mission Statement, which you will find on our letterhead and pew sheet. It is who, as a parish, as members of this parish, we aspire to be.

Some years ago, I came across the work of Australian writer, Bruce Prewer, and his lovely prayers. In wandering through one of his books, I came across:

Bidden or unbidden, God is always present...
As the sea is to the fish, as the air is to the bird,
so is God to all who live by faith, hope and love...[© Bruce Prewer]

Bidden or unbidden, God is there, as close as our next breath, calling us to love, and so, in this parish, whether we live in Denmark or Walpole, or places in between or around, we are called to be an expression of God’s love in our community.

The readings today, reflect very much the reality of God’s love in all our circumstances.

An e-friend was sharing some of the comments which came out of a congregational consultation which his congregation undertook.

Two of the comments which were really significant were:

“In all you do and discuss, a commitment to be a community of love is vital.”

and

“We need to learn not to be critical, but to be a community marked by love.”¹

A community marked by love - I wonder what that would look like?

It certainly reminded me of the reading from Acts we had a couple of weeks ago - you remember the one which describes the early church? The coming together, the fellowship and sharing, the caring for those in need with generous hearts and so forth.

It painted an amazing picture of what our church community could be like.

I remember some years ago, getting a “double whammy”, attending a Clergy Conference at which the speakers encouraged and challenged us all, through the lens of scripture, to look at who we have been called to be - what type of community God is calling us to be.

That was followed up by attending a Chapter meeting of the Franciscan Third Order, at which we had a visiting speaker from an organisation called *Pace bene*, which is an organisation which promotes non-violence. He talked to us about living in communities of peace and radical Christian love, and the transforming effect it has on the wider community.

Yesterday morning I had one of my early (5am) Zoom meetings for the Third Order interprovincial task force on Lifelong formation. One of the comments which kept coming up was about knowing what is ours to do – understanding what God is calling me to do as an individual, what God is calling us to do as a community.

Going back to our mission statement, is it in the foreground of our awareness or is it one of those things which was very nice and inspiring at the time, but it has rather “gone through to the keeper”, and we have tended to forget about it? Or do we sincerely try to live up to its promptings - to *endeavour to be an expression of the God’s love in the community?*

I believe now, more than ever, when so often church-going is looked on as something slightly odd or something from a distant past, we need to reengage with this vision as we look about at our rather fragile world.

I like my e-friend's description of his faith community wanting to be a 'community marked by love' - to not be critical but to be a community marked by love - that is something I would like to aspire to belong to.

One thing I had reinforced all those years ago, was that we are called to be a community which is counter cultural - one that stands apart from everyday society and stands with God for the kingdom values of the Gospel.

A community which is happy, generous, is unashamed about praising God and one which has goodwill for all people. That is the type of community which was so attractive in the first century that people would join, even though it meant putting themselves in very real personal danger.

A "community marked by love"

The early church was surrounded by the Roman Empire. All around there were agents of the empire, images of the imposed dominion and men with weapons to enforce the dominance of the empire everywhere. Even when they went into the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, the Antonia Fortress which was the seat of the Roman government and power, towered over the Temple. They could never forget that they were a people under domination.

But what was Jesus' message? Let's get 'em, strike back, reclaim what is ours, no matter what it might cost? No!

Against the might and violence of Rome, Jesus invited his disciples to live their lives as he had done - healing the sick, feeding the hungry, touching lepers and building relationships with everyone, even women and children, and yes, even those you would consider your enemy, - to build relationships characterised by love and respect.

One of the first Gentile converts was the Roman centurion, Cornelius, whose story we hear of in Acts 10. There is some speculation as to whether he is the same Roman centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant in Luke 7. A man in whom Jesus saw great faith and commended him for it.

Love is lived out in service and compassion. And those who diminish others, especially people on the edges of the community, are rebuked and chastised in the strongest terms. Instead of the power of domination, Jesus invites those who meet him to see power as the fulfilment of the well-being of everyone, regardless of social status.

It's not hard to imagine how this was received by people looking for a sign of hope. Poor and cast aside, people on the edges flocked to Jesus to hear the Good News. Suddenly people who were invisible had names, people who were sick were healed; those who were outcast were brought in.

Gradually a community of hope and love was born. And Jesus' words were taken to heart.

Could it be? Could it really be that the love which he was offering them was not just his love but God's as well? And can it still be true today? ¹

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments".

Paul spoke to the Greeks of the "Unknown God" - as you may know, the Greeks had lots of gods and they built altars to them. They were worried that they may have missed one, or that there was one they didn't know the name of, so they built an altar to the unknown god,

covering all bases, if you like. Paul used the opportunity to claim that altar for God - that was his way of giving witness to God.

Peter writes:

Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. [1Peter 3:15b-16a]

St Francis is famously misquoted as saying: "Preach the Gospel always and if necessary, use words".

We are called to be a faith community *endeavouring to be an expression of God's love in the community* - marked by love - God's love, the love which Jesus modelled and inspired. A community which cares, which respects, which is generous, which encourages. A community which is not frightened to share the good news, is not embarrassed by God. A community marked by God, so marked that it has become an expression of that love.

Does anyone else want to be a part of a community like that?

Because if you do, it is up to each one of us to be that expression of God's love and so transforming our community. For the glory of God. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
14 May 2023.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. David Shearman in his sermon *The Community of Love* as posted on *midrash* May 27th, 2011.