

24 April, 2016

Living in Love

Readings: John 13: 31-35, Revelation 21:16

The story is told about how John the Evangelist, author of our Gospel and the book of Revelation, sometimes called the apostle of love, was preaching at Ephesus into his 90's.

At that age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into church on a stretcher. Then, when he could no longer preach a normal sermon, he would lean up on one elbow, and the only thing he would say was, "Little children, love one another." Once he had given this one line sermon, people would carry him back out of the church.

This continued for weeks, and every week he repeated his one sentence sermon, "Little children, love one another."

Weary of the repetition, the congregation finally asked him, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command and, if only this is done, it is enough."

I've been thinking hard about this story. The idea of preaching from my bed really appeals to me. I could be carried in and give a pithy one liner and then go back to bed. I'll raise the idea with the Vestry. In the meantime, the message remains, "Little children, love one another."

If ever there is a time when love seems to be in short supply, it's when nations go to war. Over this ANZAC weekend, we remember how cruel human nature can be. We remember the great loss of life and the suffering. Paradoxically amongst the suffering and cruelty, we know many stories of kindness and heroism, sacrifice and bravery. It would be great to think, as they did in 1918, that WWI was the war to end all wars, or even maybe even WW II was that war, but, of course, fighting and cruelty continue.

I'm reminded of the song by The Black Eyed Peas - *Where is the love?*

People killin, people dyin'
Children hurt and you hear them cryin'
Can you practise what you preach?
Or would you turn the other cheek?

Father, Father, Father help us
Send some guidance from above
'cause people got me, got me questionin'
Where is the love, where is the love."

John must have asked that question too, for he, like all of us, longed for the time (as he wrote) ... when God's home will be among mortals and God himself will be there to wipe away every tear. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

In the meantime, John is at pains to give us Jesus words: Love one another just as I have loved you. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The biggest disease today, Mother Teresa once said, is more spiritual than physical. It's not leprosy or tuberculosis, she observed, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everyone. The greatest evil is lack of love and charity - the terrible indifference towards one's neighbour who lives at the roadside, assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease."

It is this lack of love that is a darkness that leads to death. We might be physically alive but quietly dying inside. A life without love is not really a life worth living. Because we are created in the image of God, we need one another.

With love we can face all sorts of hardships. To be sure, to live as a community of love in the church, is not to live without our differences or even our conflicts. But, it is to remain committed to each other and to the gospel of love.

The real killer of modern churches is the consumer mentality: "I'm in it for what I can get out of it." Rather, we need to ask, "How can I use my church as a vehicle to bring love to the community?" I think you here at St Peter's get that.

"Little children love one another"

With the world watching on, we Christians need to be modelling something better. Jesus prayed that we might be one so that the world might believe. I think the reverse is true too. When we are busy arguing among ourselves, then the world has a readymade excuse for not believing.

The readings present us with a challenge. Are we going to become more and more like the One we worship and live in love or are we going to turn our backs on the way of love?

Many of you will be familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*. Some of you may have been lucky enough to have seen it. Before Leonardo could paint the 13 figures, he needed to find men who could serve as models. Each model had to have a face that expressed da Vinci's vision of that disciple. Needless to say it was a tedious task finding just the right face.

One Sunday da Vinci was in church for worship and he saw a man in the choir who looked just like his image of Jesus. It wouldn't be hard to imagine that happening with our choir. The man Leonardo saw had features of compassion and wisdom. Arrangements were made and the man agreed to sit as the model of our Lord.

Years went by and the painting was still not complete. Da Vinci had a problem. He couldn't find just the right face for Judas. He was looking for someone whose face was streaked with despair, confusion and sin. Ten years after starting the painting, he found a man in prison. This man's face had all the qualities of Judas.

Leonardo worked feverishly for many days, but as the work went on he noticed a certain change taking place in the prisoner. His face seemed filled with tension and his blood shot eyes were filled with horror as he gaped at himself on the canvas. One day Leonardo sensed the man's uneasiness so greatly that he stopped and asked, "What is it that troubles you so much?"

The man buried his face in his hands and convulsed with sobs, "Don't you remember me? I was your model for Jesus." He began to tell his story. The miserable man had turned his back on Christ and turned his life over to hate. He no longer loved. Where there had once been love now there was misery and greed. Where there once was hope, now there was despair. Where there was once light now there was darkness.

To love is a choice...

"Little children, love one another."

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