

Reading: Matthew 22:34-46

It was St Augustine some 1600 years ago who said, "Love God and do as you like."

When our girls were young I thought I would have one of those encouraging chats with my children. "You know," I said, "you are both intelligent and hard working girls, you will be able to do whatever you want in life." I was thinking careers. A little while later I heard Rosemary trying to get Rebecca to make her bed. "I don't need to mum," she said, "Dad says I can do whatever I like."

As Christians we are often like this. We love the freedom being a Christian gives us but we don't want any of the responsibilities. We love being able to fit so easily into the community around us, free of the restrictions of our spiritual forebears. We try not to stand out or make a stand in any way.

I recently received advertising for the young people's, 'Soul Survivor' gathering. These young people aren't afraid to stand out. Listen to what they wrote. "In a world that loves self indulgence, promotes the satisfaction of our egos, fuels consumerism and sells us the lie that 'it's all about me' radical disciples of Jesus are making a stand."

Again in our Gospel today Jesus is asked a tricky question in order to trap him. It's a lawyer this time. (Today it would probably be a journalist.) "Which is the greatest law?" Jesus is asked. Two thousand years later this seems an easy question but for the Jews there were over six hundred laws so this was no easy judgement call. Jesus cunningly pulls together two very old commandments: the love for God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and the love for neighbour (Leviticus 19:18). Love becomes the very hinge upon which the law and the prophets are joined. In fact, for Jesus, love sums up everything!

Our problem isn't getting the answer but rather that love today has become just a warm fuzzy feeling like a shampoo advertisement or a basket of puppies. But Jesus is on about something much deeper - a commitment of heart, soul and mind.

In the tenderness of Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica, we see what real love looks like. He writes, "Though we might have made demands on you, we were among you as those who were gentle, like nurse caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we shared not just the gospel but our very selves - because you are so very dear to us." This is love - the sharing of our very selves. And sharing not for personal gain but with tenderness and gentleness.

But if love is more than just a fuzzy warm feeling, what does Christian love look like in practice?

Immigrants to New Zealand tend to arrive here in search of something: improved English skills, a quality education, a better life, greater freedom ... new friends. Sadly, some find themselves prisoners to loneliness. Reports suggest that 95% of the international students who come to New Zealand don't have their expectations of forming Kiwi friendships met. A new language, new culture and new education system

can make for a difficult adjustment. David French from South City Christian Centre in Christchurch says, "We are encouraged in the Bible to 'love the foreigner' and to 'welcome strangers.'" Obeying those commands can have far-reaching consequences. David points out that Anwar Sadat became the first Muslim leader to sign a peace treaty with Israel when he was president of Egypt. Why? Because he had been befriended by a Christian couple while studying in the west. Our own English conversation class gives opportunities for such befriending.

David goes on to say that many of the people who come here as students return home to take up influential positions. Several years ago, as we have through our ESOL class, South City church took up the challenge of welcoming strangers to our land. Now, the Tower Club, a lively group of around 25 students, meets each Thursday afternoon in the church cafe, with new visitors welcomed by a sandwich-board outside. David reports that this gathering is warm and friendly. Everybody learns some English and each week an aspect of the gospel is communicated. He also says that students who want to look deeper into Christianity can go on to complete an introductory course like the Pilgrim course which is run in Chinese, Japanese and Korean simultaneously!"

South City's Introduction to Christianity course was literally a Godsend for Chinese immigrant June Zhu, who arrived in New Zealand with her husband and two sons in 2002. At first, she found life here very exciting. But after a few months, that changed. She shared it this way "I couldn't speak much English. I had a four-month-old baby, I couldn't drive, I became very depressed, and I was diagnosed with a social phobia. To go out in public made me scared. Even when I walked down an empty street, I felt eyes staring at me."

June lived in this awful state for years. Then, when her younger son started school, she attended an English class. One day, when there was no class, she talked to a tutor about her depression, and admitted she had been thinking about suicide. "I told her it felt like being in a marsh with no way out." Shocked, the tutor said she wanted to help, and invited June to attend an introduction to faith course. "I had never heard of Jesus," June said. She found that first night very uncomfortable—she had to learn to sit with strange people, to eat with a knife and fork. "My legs were trembling!" she remembered.

Over the weeks her gloom lifted both literally and figuratively. "I had always had backache and tight shoulders, but since that time I have been completely normal." she said. "I felt, oh so light. Such dramatic change couldn't go unnoticed. June's husband was shocked, "He looked into my eyes and said, 'You have changed.' Do you have a boyfriend?" "No, you still are my husband." I didn't know that I looked so different ... I just felt happy! I felt strangely different. The week before I had seen myself in that dark marshy place with heavy luggage on my back. Now I saw myself on solid ground. I stood there ... looked around ... but there was no darkness, no marshland! I didn't know what had happened. Since that time June says, she's been a different person. "People who know me now see me as outgoing. I just love people! I want to see their lives changed, as mine has been. Thank you. Jesus!"

We enjoy many people in our church and in our community who have come from other lands. And I'm so proud to be part of a church that welcomes all people and that works hard to share love with others. June, the Chinese woman, put it like this:

'You built a bridge of friendship with me, and Jesus walked over that bridge into my life.' **That** is what love looks like.