

Unconditional Love

5 May, 2019

St Luke's

Reading: John 21:1-19

It's very exciting today to be welcoming Matthew into the church through his baptism. I know it's a special day for his whole family and us here at St Luke's too. I know that Matthew has a loving and a caring family especially his parents, but also his wider family and friends. I heard of one baptism where in the car on the way home the sister of little Johnny-who-had-just-been-baptised was very upset, crying and sobbing. Her mother asked her why. "I'm sad," said Susie, "the Vicar said Johnny was going to grow up in a loving and caring family. I want him to stay with us!"

Today in the Bible reading which Dougal read to us we hear Jesus asking Peter if he loves him. It can seem a strange question especially given that Jesus asks it three times. But if you know tiny bit of Greek it really helps. Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him with *agape* or unconditional love, Peter answers you know that I love you, but he answers with the word *phileo* or brotherly love. Finally, Jesus graciously allows Peter to love him not with unconditional love, but with family or *phileo* love. But Jesus goes on to explain that in the days to come Peter will indeed show his unconditional love for Jesus.

As a nation we recently remembered ANZAC day. Coming after the terrible shootings here in Christchurch there have been lots of examples of this widening of the circle of love. Of love expanded to include others, often in surprising ways.

I heard of one such story. Three friends journeyed over to the war in Europe. It had started as a bit of an adventure, that was until the shelling started. One of the friends was tragically killed but the other two were determined to give their friend a decent burial so they carried his body to the local cemetery. They approached the priest. "I'm sorry" he said "because your friend is not a Roman Catholic you will have to bury him outside the cemetery wall." Reluctantly they did as directed. Many months later they returned to pay their respects. They couldn't find the grave anywhere. So, they approached the priest. "What have you done with our friend?" they asked him. "Oh, I felt so bad after you left for forcing you to bury him outside the wall that I moved the wall."

This was the work of Jesus in a nutshell. He moved the wall of God's love to include all. He widened the circle of God's love. However limited and conditional our care of others might be, Jesus' love is unconditional towards us.

Saint Francis of Assisi had a breakthrough point in his loving. Father Murray Bodo in his book *Francis: The Journey and the Dream* puts it eloquently. "Francis remembered the first victory of his new heart. All his life long he had panicked when he met a person with leprosy. And then one day on the road below Assisi he did one of those surprising things that only the power of Jesus' Spirit could explain. He reached out and touched such a one, the very sight of whom nauseated him. He felt his knees playing tricks on him and he was afraid he would not make it to the leper standing humbly before him. The odour of rotting flesh attacked his senses as if he were smelling with his eyes and ears as well. Tears began to slide down his cheeks because he thought he wouldn't be able to do it; and as he began to lose his composure, he had to literally leap at the man before him. Trembling, he threw his arms around the leper's neck and kissed his cheek.

Then, like the feeling he remembered when he first began to walk, he was happy and confident; he stood erect and calm and loved the man in his arms. He wanted to hold him tighter but that would only be to satisfy himself now, and he was afraid to show this new found freedom. He dropped his arms and smiled, and the man's eyes twinkled back their recognition that Francis had received more than he had given. In the silence of their gazing, neither man dropped his eyes and Francis marvelled that a leper's eyes were hypnotically beautiful."

A baptism is a wonderful occasion because we celebrate life and family. Today we also widen the circle of Jesus love to include Matthew. The wall has been moved to include him.

But then Jesus has moved the wall permanently to include us all and that's really the good news.