Sermon on Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

Trinity 13 on 6th September 2020 at Annscroft and Benefice Zoom

Summer seems to have ended rather abruptly, doesn’t it? Not that the weather hasn’t been nice, but the temperature has gone down several notches. My summer clothes have gone away, and we have lit a fire for the first time as the nights have been drawing in. As the children go back to school, autumn is very much with us. Normally I enjoy autumn—there’s something bracing about wrapping up a little bit on crisp mornings, and watching the trees change colour, or foraging for blackberries, or making sloe gin, is often something I look forward to. But this year is far from normal, and I think many of us are feeling, with some foreboding, that there will be a long winter ahead of us. We might like to draw the curtains tight to keep out the dark and huddle down to survive the months ahead each in our own snug nest. We are no longer in lockdown and we have enjoyed being able to see family and close friends more, but it might feel ls as though that’s where our social lives stop at the moment. It’s tempting to for each of us to fortify our own little nuclear unit, all by ourselves, keeping the ones close to us safe.

That may be the norm in our society, but it is far from the model given us in the Bible. Both our readings today speak of living in the community of the church. Jesus redefines who is in our family when his mother and brother come looking for him as he speaks to the crowd. Jesus points to his disciples saying ‘Here is my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ So our challenge as we read today’s bible passages is to consider how they apply to us as church together in our ‘new normal’, the strange pandemic world we live in at the moment.

We begin in Romans with verse often misinterpreted.

*‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another’* says Paul.

This does not mean we have to repay every favour! Loving each other is to depend on each other, which is not culturally comfortable! Repay your debts, definitely, but do not try to balance out love—that is not the nature of love, which is freely given expecting nothing back. Love is not the currency our culture trades in, and we have to watch out for the distortions that surround us. Give freely—and accept with grace and delight!

Paul reminds us that the greatest commandment is to *‘Love your neighbour as yourself’*. The Covid crisis has helped many of us get to know our actual neighbours in new ways. So let us continue to think of them, even though many of them will have family support again. Let us love them, and other church family members, without reservation, actively seeking their good. Don’t let’s go back to a tight definition of our neighbours as those we have most in common with, those we know the best or feel most comfortable with.

Now is the time—not to withdraw into ourselves, but to live in the light of God’s love. We are not poor scared little creatures, trying to hibernate through the winter, but alive with the good news of hope and trust in God. Now is the time to be beacons in our community— no so much people who proclaim that the virus will eventually run its course, though it’s important that we hang onto that, but people who know that God’s purposes are good, and his hand remains over us all. This is not a time to stop praying, to lose track of our faith because meeting is hard—this is a time to renew our commitment and discover that God is truly present in the darkness.

Going on with Paul’s words, I don’t suppose many of you are indulging in drunkenness and revelry, nor debauchery and licentiousness, but we are all vulnerable to quarrelling and jealousy! The grass often seems greener on the other side, other people have more company, have more fun with their friends, can afford more nice things, don’t have the problems we have… whatever we think we lack, we can only too easily slip into comparisons and envy. It can even look like humility—other people are nicer than me, they pray better than me, they are better Christians. That’s still not how God sees us, and not how he wants us to think. He made each one of us unique, with our own path to tread. We will find his presence alongside us if we concentrate on him, not if we look to other people! In community, we are each called to build each other up, to encourage and support. Yes, we can be inspired by each other, but not to become clones! Each of us has our own contribution to make, our own precious contribution without which our community will be the poorer.

And as for quarrelling—well! All of us that live with someone else will almost certainly have had a cross moment in the last 24 hours. And even if you live on your own, I bet you thought a few less than kind things about someone else in the recent past! God is not calling us to perfection this side of heaven, but he does invite us to use the friction of everyday life to let him in—to offer us forgiveness and renewal time and time again. That happens in the families we are born into and form through marriage, but it also happens in church. It is not surprising that we find each other irritating from time to time, or even that we fall out with each other. What does matter is when we leave it there. God calls us to live together in harmony and to develop our relationships in love.

Which takes us onto the reading from Matthew, where Jesus invites us to address conflict in the church family. We are much better at sweeping uncomfortable things under the carpet, but Jesus asks us to talk through our differences, one to one—and not complain about someone behind their back! Jesus outlines a process for dealing with hurts so that they will not fester and cause dissension. He doesn’t expect us to have perfect communities where nothing goes wrong, but he gives us huge responsibility for reclaiming each other when sin threatens to divide us.

This is real hard work—it doesn't just happen naturally, and it certainly won’t happen if we don’t see each other except in Zoom or with the limited opportunities to talk that our socially distanced services offer. Being church means working at relationships through the week and not just on Sundays. It means being family to each other day by day, sharing our needs and developing fellowship. It’s going to take conscious effort. Where we would have normally chatted after services and picked up on people’s mood and needs, we now have to pick up the phone. But now is the time! Time to deliberately act out the calling we have as Christians to be the family of God.

Our ability to exercise hospitality is limited at the moment—but not gone! Some of you have been meeting in gardens and on walks, some of you feel comfortable to have friends round one at a time. Don’t stop now! However you feel able to share the goodness of God’s love, whether it’s through a chat on the doorstep or a phone or video call, recognise it as the spiritual exercise of hospitality to practice whenever possible. And don’t let’s forget God’s command to us to entertain strangers! We can’t literally do so, but we can remember the vulnerable in our community now by putting something into the foodbank collection boxes at the supermarkets, even if we can’t make collections from church. It’s tempting to block out gloomy news, but let’s not opt out learning about the needs of those in trouble. We can be hospitable in our thoughts, praying for Christians who face persecution, refugees in camps with inadequate handwashing facilities, people protesting injustice – anyone God brings to our attention.

The other gift we can exercise is generosity. In this strange time, many of us will have spent less than usual although some will be experiencing serious financial worries. God invites each of us to give according to our means—but he will draw to our attention the ways in which our community needs support. Our churches have suffered serious financial loss while they were closed. Many charities have likewise seen their incomes plummet with the loss of fundraising opportunities. God invites us to share our resources, to give freely and to be blessed in doing so. Enlarge the boundaries of your concerns—remember that all we have is given to us by God and belongs ultimately to him. We pray that God would give us open hands and joy in sharing the blessings he has bestowed on us.

One of the surprising joys of the lockdown has been worshipping online with a wider community. In our benefice, we have enjoyed joint services as never before. No one has had to travel to an unfamiliar building, but we have still managed come together as a community. It has been a joy to welcome people into our worship who don’t live anywhere near us, but still join our family of faith. Some of us have enjoyed worshipping with other churches too, using their online services. I hope that belonging to the church has become a little less like belonging in a building and more like belonging to each other. God calls us to build on that, but also to continue to make sure that we include those who can’t access online worship. It is with joy that we come back into our buildings, but they are only accessories that help us worship—the church remains the people, wherever they are.

Jesus tells us that when two or three are gathered together in his name, he is there among them. That is true when we meet in person, or on the phone or online, and even when we pray on our own. Every time we enter into prayer and worship, we join the body of saints and angels. The heavenly hosts praise God day and night, and somewhere in the world, there will always be someone praying alongside you, whatever time it is. So be encouraged, even if you don’t see anyone who is part of your own particular church community, you are still part of God’s family. But don’t stop there! Be encouraged to take action and connect with the people of God, in hospitality, generosity, prayer and worship!

Blessings

Graham and Emma