

Sermon

Easter 6: Hampnett and Northleach evensong

When you visit the Black Cat Café in Northleach you can now purchase a suspended coffee; that is, instead of just buying a drink for yourself you buy two or more and the cost of these extra drinks (or food of course) is set aside for when someone in need comes to the café in search of help.

It is a beautifully simple concept that many of the large coffee shop chains now operate. Suspended food and drink is for anyone in need and it is an unconditional gift in that the recipient will never be known to the giver. We entrust the gift into the care and judgement of the café staff. It may surprise you that there is more need for suspended coffees in Northleach than we might realise.

The idea of a suspended coffee has its roots in thinking very similar to that which we heard about in our second reading. We choose to pass on to others the blessings we have received. We choose to love others, because we have been loved ourselves, and we want others to share in that experience.

Social commentators often say that the poor are more generous than the wealthy; there is some truth in that in

relative terms, but I think there is a deeper truth that is even more striking. The most generous tend to be those who truly appreciate how much they have experienced love in their lives. Those who have experienced unconditional love throughout their lives, are those most likely to pass on unconditional love to others. The experience of love and generosity is key to generating love and generosity – a virtuous circle.

In the Christian tradition love is rooted in God's love of us and our love of God.

And it is because God first loved us, that we love God. And to express our love we follow God's commandments, radically simplified by Jesus who adopted the first of Moses' ten commandments – love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, mind – but then condensed the remaining nine into one: love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.

It is not enough to sign up to the Christian faith; we must live it too, and as Jesus also declared, it is by our love that others will know that we are Jesus' disciples.

How that love is to be expressed is for each to wrestle with in conversation with our conscience. Jesus' own life gives us the

clearest picture, succinctly represented in three words: sharing, sending, sacrificing...

First, Jesus loved us by sharing with us the love of His Father.

Our knowledge and experience of God is derived from Jesus' knowledge and experience of God. It is sometimes joked that the worst thing that can happen to a Christian is to take a theology degree for it is unlikely to strengthen one's faith. That is unfair to many faithful Christian academics though the more general point is well made. Our understanding of God is uniquely revealed through the person, life, mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Ours is a faith grounded in relationship and our cue to our relationship with God is rooted in all that Jesus learnt and heard through his relationship with the Father.

Importantly, Jesus describes this relationship as one of friendship. We are not servants of God in the sense that we act through obligation and duty or because we have no choice. Rather we are God's friends, enjoying a mutually rewarding, reciprocal relationship in which we give and receive out of love and with joy.

Secondly, Jesus' love was a sending love. Jesus gathers his disciples together in order to send them out again. This is

detailed twice in the gospels - with the sending of the 12 and the 70 – and it is repeated in our second reading today: “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...”

Our modern services of holy communion reflect this theme faithfully in the Dismissal – the declaration that the mass has ended – with the words: Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

Sadly, the Book of Common Prayer is almost entirely devoid of any such injunction at the end of its principal services; wrongly and even dangerously conveying perhaps that the primary or sole purpose of worship is the service itself, when the truth is quite the opposite. Worship both glorifies God and equips us to be God’s agents in the world.

Thirdly, of course, Jesus’ love was a sacrificial love. We see this mostly clearly on the cross of course. But we also see it throughout his life as he shuns the normal structures, securities and relationships of life for his ministry. Jesus may have gone to the cross faithfully submissive to his Father, but he didn’t go to the cross willingly as his experience in the garden reveals. We undermine the power of our own calling to sacrificial love if we associate too readily Jesus’ divine identity with his sacrifice, and thereby fail to recognise the very ordinary and tortuous route He took to making that eventual decision to submit to God. For that route is the one

we are invited to take also: 'no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

We cannot do any of this in our own strength, but only by submitting to and accepting the strength of God within us; in other words, by accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate in two weeks' time at Pentecost.

As the season of Easter begins to draw to a close we are being nurtured towards a time when we place behind us once more the story of the person of Jesus and move forwards instead towards the story of the Spirit of Jesus. And this is when the story becomes truly our own too. For the Spirit of Jesus is what drew each of us to faith and sustains us in that faith too.

As these dying days of Easter pass, may each of us experience a heightened awareness of our dependence upon God's strength and grace, and be open afresh to new calls of service upon our time, energy, gifts and resources, as we seek to serve Him, our Friend and Master, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Last Friday the Church celebrated the lesser festival of the English Saints and Martyrs of the Reformation Era. This day

celebrates those individuals from the 14th to the 17th century, and especially in the 16th, who sacrificed their lives for the cause of their faith. Those who in Jesus' own words 'lay down one's life for one's friends'