

Blandford Forum - Sunday 24 June 2007

Rev Tim Storey

"They'll Know We Are Christians"

John 13:34-35, Romans 10:10-15

When the Exxon Valdez sank off Alaska it was estimated that the average cost of rehabilitating a seal after the oil spill was \$80,000. At a special ceremony, two of the most expensively saved animals were being released back into the wild amid cheers and applause from onlookers. A minute later, in full view of them all a killer whale ate them both.

A woman came home to find her husband in the kitchen shaking frantically, almost in a dancing frenzy, with some kind of wire running from his waist towards the electric kettle. Intending to jolt him away from the deadly current, she whacked him with a handy plank of wood, breaking his arm in two places. Up to that moment, he had been happily listening to his Walkman.

Two animal rights protesters were protesting at the cruelty of sending pigs to a slaughterhouse in Bonn, Germany. Suddenly, all two thousand pigs broke loose and escaped through a broken fence, stampeding madly. The two hopeless protesters were trampled to death.

True stories of people who tried their best and failed miserably.

Jesus said *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Fundamental stuff. That's fine then - we must all love each other and then people will see God in us. It all sounds so simple and in one sense it is *that* simple. And yet, like the well-intended people we heard about, it never quite works out that way. We *want* to tell people about Jesus after all, the reading at the start of our service tells us that unless somebody does it, they won't hear. But so often our feeble attempts end up in apologetic mumbles about side issues or descend into unresolvable arguments.

We *try* so hard to be the sort of Christians whose actions back up our words but we manage to fall flat on our faces just at the time when we want to impress someone with our deep love. The problem is, I think that often we try *too* hard.

Last week, we heard the story of the Sheep and the Goats, the parable about Jesus rewarding those who did things for others in his name. The thing which always strikes me about that story is the fact that the people Jesus spoke about didn't have a clue what he was talking about. "Look ... sorry ... I think you've got the wrong bloke - what are you talking about?" Jesus actually talks about events and incidents when they reacted so naturally and normally to those in need with such a deep-rooted love, that they did it without even thinking about it.

As I say, I think the problem we often have when we are sharing the Gospel is that often we try *too* hard. Instead of simply being who *we* are and letting God do it naturally through us, we are too busy trying to help, and we end up, metaphorically speaking, hitting them over the head with the Gospel when they are listening to it at a much quieter and deeper level.

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this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Firstly, Jesus said "Love one another."

A question: "What is Church?" Over the past months I hope we have established the answer that it isn't the building but the people. Ok, it is people but is it just a group of people who come together because they want to? What makes the Church different from other Community groups?

When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians the chapter on Love, 1 Corinthians 13 immediately follows a chapter telling the church off because they had become totally self absorbed and just like any other group of people.

Jesus said: Love one another.

But the Corinthians didn't: they were far too interested in their own agendas, in factionalism and had lost sight of the corporate nature of being church being guided and controlled by the Holy Spirit. Of course, in the 21st Century the Church is way beyond that, isn't it? No, I think not. An increasing problem in the church: the idea that the church exists for "me". I want my stake in decision making. I want to know where my money is spent. I want my agenda to be noted.

When Jesus said Love one another, he was making an fundamental observation about the way the church works, it relies on the fact that the love Paul defined in 1 Corinthians 13 is to be expressed in the body of 1 Corinthians 12 is all about an understanding that others are to be put before ourselves. Firstly, Jesus said "love one another" It is radical, non-worldly stuff.

Secondly *Jesus said As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

How had Jesus loved them? These two verses follow on a profoundly symbolic act. This is the night when a million thoughts are crowding through Jesus' mind for he knows that within hours he will be betrayed and killed. He is desperate to draw the past three years into some kind of perspective for his disciples. In one giant revision exercise Jesus spends some five chapters of Johns gospel trying to draw together the strings.

It is the Last Supper and before any of the other things take place including the initiation of the service in which we are about to partake Jesus does something deeply humiliating: he washes his disciples feet because none of them would lower themselves to do it. I suspect in total silence he washes away all the stench and grime of the streets of Jerusalem from their feet. An act symbolising what he is about to do on the cross. An act of love that leads him to say ***As I have loved you, so you must love one another.***

An act which symbolises Gods love in sending us a Saviour a long time before we knew we needed to be saved. An act of humility and self-sacrifice, which led John in his letters to say: ***This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*** There is often a temptation to say "Well it was easy for Jesus, wasn't it? He was God!" Look at the Temptations of Luke 4 and you see the temptation to take the easy way out and bypass all this humility stuff by doing one big show on the Temple Roof. Look on a few hours from the Last Supper and you see the other great Temptation the temptation to run away from the cross: Luke 22:42 "***Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.***"

Firstly *Jesus said Love one another.* Secondly *Jesus said As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

And Thirdly, *Jesus said By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love*

one another."

We know of God's love for us in sending Jesus. We know how Jesus modelled that love in his humility, his self-sacrifice, and his deep commitment to the task God had set him. But how can we express this love, both within the Church Community, and beyond? The question is why we do what we do. One of the great temptations in the Christian life is to do those things which we ought to do *because* we ought to do them rather than because it is what we want to do. In other words we are so focussed on *doing* the right thing because we want to be *seen* to do the right thing that we do it for the wrong reasons. Now you might turn to me and say "But we're still doing the *right* thing, aren't we?" and in one sense, you would be correct. But then, so were the Pharisees. They always did the right thing and wanted people to see that they were doing the right thing. The problem was, that everyone, including Jesus, knew that they were doing it for all the wrong reasons. He called them "Whitewashed tombs" - places which were smart in appearance on the outside but full of dead things on the inside.

So what are we to do? My belief is that we must always be true to ourselves - we must have the integrity which means we can "own" our actions. There are times when I do something not because I want to, but because I am trying to be obedient to God. And sometimes I have the satisfaction of knowing that I was obedient and God is pleased. There are times, though, when I come away growling inwardly because I did it with a cold heart my reluctance was there for all to see. Maybe it would be better if I hadn't done it at all. There are times when I have done things with the right motivation, the right heart - and it hasn't worked. And yet, I know that God is pleased because my motivation was right.

Thirty four years ago I was given a guitar and if you think the noise I make now is bad, you should have heard it then! But over the years my playing has not only improved technically, but my ear is attuned to songs in such a way that I can play along without music, knowing the direction a song is taking, knowing the chord sequences that are likely to follow and knowing the rhythms which are likely to be used. 90% of that is subconscious. When I look at Mr Coldwell with far more years of experience on a far greater instrument the same is even more true. Discipleship is like the learning of an instrument: following Jesus day by day, week by week so that eventually his Holy Spirit fills us in such a way as to control our lives so that we are obedient to God because we *want* to rather than because we *have* to. That is the difference and that is what lets people know that we are Christians. Because that is what they see: people see through us, however good we think we might be at hiding our motivation! They still see - and they judge us, yes, they judge us, as much on our motivation as the action itself.

"What is purpose of Fruit?" Fruit is there to be attractive in sight and smell to insects, so that they will take the seeds and continue the life of the plant or tree. "What is purpose of the Fruit of the Spirit?" First and foremost, the Fruit of Love, Joy and Peace is aimed to be attractive and to provide the aroma of God. But, ultimately, it is there to be consumed by not only those in the Christian community but those in the world. The Kingdom of God which is established in the life of the Church where the practical working out of the Community life that Jesus exhorted his listeners in the Sermon on the Mount is lived out, not only take root within the church but breaks out into the world beyond.

Jesus said By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Why will they know this? Because the aroma of the Fruit of the Spirit in this church, this body of believers, this aroma of which we know love to be the first, will be the sign to Blandford that the Kingdom of God is alive and well.

Firstly, ***Jesus said Love one another.*** The world does not revolve around you. Your agenda is not the most important.

Secondly, ***Jesus said As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*** Look at his model of humility and self-sacrifice. Look at how his love was expressed before we even were aware of our need of it.

And Thirdly, ***Jesus said By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*** Be provocative. Let our love be so radical that it breaks out into the community beyond these walls and speaks of the way we have been loved and want to love in return. Let us love as we have been loved. That is how they will know we are Christians.