

Blandford Forum - Sunday 18 February 2007
Rev Chris Edmondson, Warden of Lee Abbey
"Worship Is ... Love"
Matthew 5:23-26

Picture the scene...maybe familiar to some families..Sunday morning, mum goes into son's bedroom, flings back the curtains and says 'Its 9.00am, Sunday, so its time to get up for church'...response from bedclothes...'I don't want to go'. She tries again...Its...don't want to go..She tries another tack...'Give me two good reasons why you don't want to go'...he replies,, 'I don't like the people there and they don't like me - now you give me two reasons why you think I should get up and go'..to which she replies, 'You're 55 years old and you're the vicar!'.

Were there to be any truth in that story, ...!, one of the things it seems to indicate is an unresolved problem in the area of relationships...'I don't like them and they don't like me', full marks for honesty, but its something of a contrast with Jesus' final prayer for his disciples, those present with him in the Upper Room, and those who would follow on, found in John 17, that 'by this will all people know you are my disciples - that you have love for each other'.

And down the centuries, and in our own day, as the church - and by that I mean people, not the institution, us, not just others, whoever they are - we often seem to do a magnificent job at shooting ourselves in the foot on this one. Its my conviction, and experience that there's nothing like the local church when its working well, as a place of acceptance, welcome, support and challenge, but sadly I've spoken to many people who've had bad experiences or impressions, including one guy who said to me, 'I've got enough problems without linking up with the church!' When I asked what he meant he spoke of division and disagreement in the congregation, an atmosphere of tension in worship services, - a far cry from our theme today 'WORSHIP...IS...LOVE'.

But one of the many brilliant things about Jesus' sermon on the mount, from which our reading earlier came, is that in three chapters of Matthew's gospel, he cuts to the chase and gives some clear, and it has to be said, deeply challenging teaching, on a whole bunch of key issues, not least in the area of relationships, how that affects our worship and life together, and vice versa. But teaching that I believe is intended to affect and shape all our relationships, and in every context. The church community should be a laboratory in which these are developed and practised, but it shouldn't stop there.

Let's look/hear again what Jesus had to say... Matthew 6.23

Been said that whenever you come across the word 'THEREFORE', in the Bible, look back and se what its 'there for'! In this case, Jesus has been saying that an angry and murderous attitude towards someone is bad, therefore, go and do something to repair that relationship before it gets to that point. And to further underline that, he says if you're on your way to worship, put your offering down - what was expected at that point to be brought to worship - because its no good saying the right words, going through the motions, singing the right hymns and songs, if there are fractured, relationships. Worship of that kind is empty - 'Go first', he says and be reconciled.

Reconciliation, a very contemporary word - used a lot, and in different ways. But what does it mean?

And reconciliation not just a contemporary word - ONE OF GREAT THEMES OF BIBLE...

Concerned first with our relationship with God - 2 Cor 5 17, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself - through that horrific death on the cross.

Here in Matthew 5, focus is on relationships with fellow human beings - and can't separate one of these aspects from the other, if to lead authentic Christian life.

Wider picture still - between peoples and nations.

This is so important, because if I were to ask you what brings us the most joy and fulfillment in life and what brings the most frustration, hurt, and disappointment - answer found in the same word - RELATIONSHIPS.

And the fact that people are Christians, doesn't make this area any easier, but it DOES mean there's a greater expectation - because it's a sign that the reconciliation that's been made possible through the cross is being worked out in our lives; and also there is a source of power available to us, in the Holy Spirit, to enable us to think and act differently.

Illustrate a little from life of LA Community. At the moment, there are people from 16 different countries who make up the working community - 17 if you count Scotland! Add to that, different ages, a lot in their 20's, different temperaments, and as well as the joy, in working and living together, there can be other kinds of experiences as well! So with that being the reality, how do we learn to live and love, as Jesus would in our place. One of the ways is through what we call our community promises; after a minimum of three months, we make a public commitment to God and the whole community in a number of areas.

COMMUNITY PROMISE.

Here's the one that addresses the area of relationships:..

There isn't a week goes by, when someone doesn't have to seek reconciliation with another community member for some reason. But let me ask you, what difference might it make to the life, worship and witness of this church if you were to have that as something you 'signed up to'? What difference would it make to any of you in your workplace, school, neighbourhood, family, if you signed up to that. I find it deeply challenging, but also empowering and freeing.

What is clear, is that it is important that we model the forgiveness and reconciliation Christ has made possible for us. In my last few minutes, can I offer some practical steps as to how this can be worked out. (Nothing worse than YBH...!)

TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Our problem sometimes is that many of us look like adults, but we still behave in playground mode. 'I'll be friends with him/her if she/he says sorry first'. I remember those kinds of comments in the playground at BGS - usually girls of course!

Friends, this is so important, and yes it's hard, but a sign that we've understood our own reconciliation, is that we will take the initiative to heal a relationship that's fractured. Seems crazy, certainly counter-cultural, but its Jesus is saying here in Matthew 5.24... If you know someone has something against you - you do something about it. Don't even think about worship till that's sorted. Hard - swallow pride. And Jesus could

say, 'Don't wait - get it done; if you wait for the other person to make the first move it may never happen'

ASK FOR CLARIFICATION

This is common sense isn't it? So I won't labour the point. Are we on the same song sheet regarding whatever we are at odds about? You might find out there is nothing. More than once I've spent ages worrying about something that didn't exist! Or you might find out that what you thought the person was upset about was not the issue at all, but something entirely different, and nothing to do with you. Or you might find out you were simply misunderstood in some way and not at fault at all. Getting clarity is the opportunity to clear it up.

ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

Story of man/woman having had a row...he making it up..next time a worm 'never the same thing twice!'

Despite that...as hard as it is to admit we are wrong/at fault, especially in this blame culture we live in, its even harder in my experience to ask for forgiveness. But we can't assume in this area - we sometimes need to say the words, 'Will you forgive me?', or 'I need your forgiveness'. Not easy at all, but Jesus didn't say it would be - after all how was it for him to say from the cross, 'Father forgive them - they don't know what they are doing'?

RESOLVE TO CHANGE

Have you ever said - you'll certainly have heard others express what I call 'Popeye theology'? Do you know what I mean? Popeye - heard of? What was his strap line - 'I yam what I yam'. So we/others say - 'That's just the way I am'. Friends can I say something - that isn't good enough. Yes, God gives us a particular temperament, but that's never an excuse to hurt others with our personality. If we believe in the life-changing power of Jesus, then we will allow him to his work in us, so that we will ask ourselves, 'WWJD' in our place, so our attitudes are conformed more and more to his image - his life in us, his power gradually changing us.

OFFER REAL - NOT PHONEY - FORGIVENESS.

When someone asks for our forgiveness, it can be all too easy to say 'Oh it didn't matter' and move on; when clearly it DID matter, and it hurt. Equally, I don't have much time for the saying 'forgive and forget', because some of us have been hurt in ways that make it impossible to just forget something. All that is superficial, phony forgiveness - and not really worthy of the word. It may also mean that whatever the problem was, gets brought up again. Real forgiveness says, 'Yes, I was hurt, in fact it hurt deeply, but I choose to forgive you', and what helps me is to recognize I can't actually forget, but I CAN remember differently, and that releases healing for me and the other person. We'll never know true freedom if we hold grudges.

Returning to our Bible reading - however you look at it, you can't separate worship and relationships. God is concerned about all our relationships, so... think through your relationships - is there need of reconciliation somewhere? Maybe something recent - maybe from years ago. Is there any wounded history in the church that has not been faced and dealt with, because something of that in the past can affect adversely what we

experience in the present. If there is some step to take, for the sake of the relationship between you and others, and you and God, and that your church community might be one of reconciliation - make the first move. We're made to give and receive love, and when relationships go wrong, we all know the pain is huge, but I also know and believe that the relief of reconciliation is greater.