

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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FOLLOWING IN LOVE

26th June 2016

Luke 9:51-62

Galatians 5:13-25

Way back in 1984 I spent a summer with the Hupla people of Irian Jaya in New Guinea. There were three missionaries working with this very primitive tribe (literally stone age people) who were teaching them about the love of God and working in health care and Bible translation. One was Vi, who was learning the language so that she could make the translation of Scripture. One day she was working away with the women who were helping her become more fluent in Hupla. As part of the conversation, she asked them "How do you understand what it means to be a Christian?" And back came the answer, "You must stop smoking weeds and you must not go to the men's huts, and you must not go on the sacred ground, and then you can be a Christian." Vi was appalled. This was not what had been said, but it was what had been inferred by watching the Christians, the missionaries and the converts. It was all about the do nots – including one which was just being culturally sensitive – not going on the sacred ground – and there was nothing about the love of God.

Ever since the beginning of the church, the tendency of Christian people has been to try to make our faith into a set of restrictions. If you ask people what it means to be a Christian, chances are you will get a list of "do nots." It was no different in the new church in Galatia. They too had a tendency to bind themselves and define their faith by rules and regulations. But that was not why Jesus came. That was not why he lived and died and rose again. "You were called to freedom!" says St. Paul, and what could be a greater calling than that, why would anyone want to throw away that gift, the gift of freedom?

The freedom of following Jesus is illustrated in both of our readings today. St. Paul talks in terms of love. The whole law – if you want laws and rules – he says is summed up by the command to love your neighbour as yourself. Loving others is the fulfilment of the law but ironically it is also the opposite of living by laws and rules. Because you can't fake love. You can't "do" it the way you can do your duty. You can't tick it off on a list as something done which can be put behind you now. Love is a matter of the heart, it is a matter of the personality, it is a way of looking at others, and at life. Being a Christian is learning to grow in love, learning every day. It isn't a matter of saying that if you don't do this and that (smoke, drink, swear, have extra-marital sex, get angry – whatever) you are in; it is a matter of saying because you are in you will live in a whole new way. And yes, it is a choice, but it is also something which you cannot do yourself, but need God's help with.

The rest of the passage we read from Galatians today contrasts a life lived without God's Spirit within us with a life which is given over to the control of God. Paul

contrasts a selfish life with a selfless one. It may be that no one, or very few people do all the dreadful things which Paul lists as works of the flesh, but the point is, that if you are not living out of love for your neighbour, then you will be living for yourself, and such selfish living would put no bar on this kind of behaviour if it appeals to a person, or if by doing these things you can get your own way. Some of the wickedness he mentions are what we might think of as spectacular – sorcery, say, or carousing. But he also puts in his list jealousy, factions, envy, quarrels and anger – and the church has never been entirely free of these things. All of them spring from living with self at the centre, rather than love for God or for others.

So how can we be set free? – it is all about freedom, remember. The answer is that of ourselves we can't. You know that. You know that very few of you are still keeping any New Year's resolutions you made. You know how hard it is to make yourself be good and do what you know you ought. Because that is about ticking things off on a list again. Did you notice that while Paul talks about specific actions which are works of the flesh, he talks of attitudes which are fruit, fruit growing naturally from God's Spirit. Attitudes are more powerful than actions: they direct the whole inclination of our life. And these attitudes are grown in us, like fruit: they are God's gift. We are called to live in love with one another and all the world, but that love is not asked of us before it is given to us, before it is grown in us. It begins with a gift.

When Jesus knew that it was time to bring his ministry to its climax, Luke tells us that he set his face to go to Jerusalem. He set his face, which means he would not be distracted from his purpose. And on the way he met with some others who wanted to come with him, or who he called to accompany him, and what he asked of each of them was that they set their faces too. They were not to be distracted by the desire for human comforts. They were not to be distracted by the duty to care for parents. They were not to turn back at all – there is no rear view mirror when we follow Jesus. He calls us to set our faces to point in the way that he is going, looking forwards and outwards, not backwards and inwards. The commitment involved in following Jesus takes our whole selves, and transforms our whole selves.

Jesus was going to Jerusalem to die, because of his love for the world, for the people of the world for each person in the world, he was determined not to be distracted from his path of sacrificial love. And it is that path on which we too walk when we commit ourselves to follow Jesus. It is the path of self-forgetting, sacrificial love, which is shown in action not just in word.

We are to love one another. If we do that then all else falls away. Love is not a deeply hidden feeling, but is an attitude, a way of looking at people, a way of interacting with people. If we live in love for one another, if we allow God to grow his love in us, then we will not be distracted by past, by social responsibilities, by our own desires. All of these things will be swallowed up in the love of God which is so much greater. If we live in love, if we allow God to grow his love in us, then he will also grow his joy, his peace, his patience (there is no love without patience and no patience without love), his kindness his goodness, his faithfulness, his gentleness and his self-control. None of which are given to us for our benefit but to help us grow in love for others. (But of course we do benefit from them as well, who wouldn't want to have all this positivity welling up inside and shaping their lives?)

There is no law for or against what God grows in us, but if we allow him to keep us focussed and allow him to grow his life within us then we will find that we are living out

of love for others, far more than out of love for ourselves. And so we should, for love is the badge of the church. Jesus said that the world would know that we are his disciples if we have love for one another. Jesus agreed with Paul that the only commands that matter are to love God and to love our neighbours.

Recently I was recommending to you all – and I still do – Steve Aisthorpe’s book, “The Invisible Church” based on his research about why people leave the church and about whether that also means that they leave their faith. The Session recently heard me read a short passage from that book, which I want to share with you now as well. Steve says:

‘Church’ without love is, of course, nothing of the kind. It is a woeful misnomer, a tragic anomaly. If a building bears a sign with the word ‘restaurant’, but has no food on offer, it is not a restaurant. A bank without money is not really a bank. Without love, services of ‘worship’ centred on communal singing of hymns and songs become little more than pious karaoke. ‘Fellowship’ that is empty of love bears no resemblance to the radical, self-giving, love-impregnated koinonia [people are looking for]. When love is absent, ‘outreach’ becomes nothing more than a religious recruitment drive. The most critical indictment of a church congregation is not a deficiency of faith, nor an inadequacy of knowledge. It is a failure to respond to the love of Christ in ways that create loving relationships among believers and loving behaviour towards all. (The Invisible Church page 157-8)

Recently it seems that a lot of my time has been taken up with church structures, both in the presbytery and in St. Bride’s church as it moves into a unitary constitution. A group of Christians meeting and serving together needs a structure, and the smallest, newest house-church soon develops some if only based around who will bring cake next time; so I know we need structures to help us function as a church. We need structures, but they should never be more important than our primary calling which is God’s gift to us – that we should be those who live in and from his love and show that love to the world, one person at a time.

It is good to talk about God’s love given to us. It is good to remind each other that we love each other. It is good to be reminded that we are to live out of God’s love. But it is not by our words that people see the love of God, it is not by our talking about it. It is by our actions. By actions which are not done out of the duty of rule-keeping, but out of a heart full and flowing with love. It can’t be faked. It can’t be forced. It can’t be manufactured. It can only be asked for and received from God as we turn away from distraction towards him – that is what repentance means – and as we allow him to lead us and live within us and change us. Amen.

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