



The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
3 July 2016

I shall stand for love

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Isaiah 66.10-14; Galatians 6.7-16; Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

You don't need me to tell you what a traumatic week it has been in the life of our nation. I think many of us could identify with the poet Jackie Kay's description of grief. She writes of the last week: "I wake up, fairly innocently for a few moments, and then the news filters into my consciousness, and I remember. It's like a bereavement. When you first wake, for the first few seconds, that loved one is still in your world, then you remember they are gone and you are distraught. I hadn't realized it would hit me like this. None of us had. It's trauma. A body blow to the country."

There have been many epithets to describe what we have been living through: "Game of Thrones", "Julius Caesar", "King Lear", "I Claudius". We are, in this country, used to being able to complain about our politicians. It's a bit like kids complaining about their parents - it's based on the underlying faith that however much you complain they are still going to be there for you in the morning. That is until the morning you wake up after the divorce and find that no one is home, no one in charge, and no chance of Europe coming back. And if you think that it can't get worse, remember we have the Chilcot Report this week. It's been difficult to find people to hold onto or admire - the sands shift after the tide comes in, and it washes their sand castles away. Our politicians on all sides have not done themselves credit. I am haunted by the image of Nigel Farage standing in the European Parliament insulting 27 different nations and filling our nation with shame and humiliation. How poignant it has been this last week during the bitter in-fighting of our present day, to witness 10,000 people standing in silence with those thousands of simple crosses remembering more than a million people who lost their lives in the battle of the Somme 100 years ago, and hearing the words of the poet Siegfried Sassoon being read:

War's a bloody game...

Have you forgotten yet?...

Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

We all need to have values, leaders, and a national identity to believe in. It's so hard seeing this melt down. What can we hold onto that's worth believing in? Well there is Wales winning the football, but then I'm not Welsh. What can we believe in? Just over a week ago, in fact the day before the referendum, thousands of people gathered in Trafalgar Square. We had come to remember someone whose life and practical vision did seem worth holding onto. The simple words that were quoted again and again that afternoon were these: "We have far more in common than that which divides us." At that vigil for Jo Cox, a young mother, a compassionate and by all accounts inspirational politician - brutally murdered in the deluded name of patriotism, the words of this poem by Dorothy Oger were read:

For love

I shall stand for love,
Even with a broken soul,
Even with a heavy heart.

I shall stand for love,
For the world is wounded.
Not just my little piece of land,

Where I am mostly safe,
Where I am mostly well,
But our world, everywhere
Every day.

I shall stand for love,
Because we need more light,
Not more deaths,
Not more power,
Not more bombs.

I shall stand for love,
So that our children are safe
So that our friends are sheltered
So that our borders are open.

I shall stand for love,
Even with a broken soul,
Even with a heavy heart.

Dorothy Oger
Brussels, 23rd of March 2016

There was a crowd of thousands who heard this being read, but as we heard the words of this poem there was total silence. "I shall stand for love." I scribbled the words down on my hand. I knew they were important, worth writing down, more than that, as the life of Joe Cox testified, worth giving one's life for. I shall stand for love.

I was particularly struck by the second line. "I shall stand for love, even with a broken soul and a heavy heart." We often of course think of love as the end of the film - the unity that you romantically reach as the music swells. But the truth is of course that it's often when our souls are broken open and our hearts are heavy that we have to work out and make the choice - where do we stand and what are we prepared to stand for. Like now - standing for love now even with a broken soul and a heavy heart. It is actually at this very point that the Christian faith in fact makes most sense. Is it not Christ who remains the constant? Like an anchor deeper than the sea? Like the rock on which to build the church? "I shall stand for love"

Last week Sam, our vicar, after the result of the referendum wrote to the staff and congregation of St Martin's - a gathered community here in the centre of London from so many parts of the world, with many from Europe all such integral parts of this place. At the end of that letter he wrote: "We believe it's possible to build together a community of humility, generosity, gratitude, grace, truth and compassion - for which the only word we know is church. We're called to be a living example of what the reconciling, liberating and transforming love of God can do. It may be that a witness like ours can begin to heal our country and inspire it to take a different, more inclusive and more hopeful direction. But if it does not we are going to do it anyway."

The church is called to stand for love. But it's not easy in the twenty first century to stand for Christ. At Gay Pride last Saturday some of those representing Christians at Pride said they found it harder today to come out as Christians than they did to come out as LGBT because Christians have often had a poor record of standing up for love. Christians who want to be inclusive have lost confidence in the ability to proclaim their faith, lest people mistake them for the religious zealots out to condemn.

Yet alongside the grief for our nation I have described, this week has also, for our church, been a week of celebrations. The noun ordination comes from the Latin word *ordinare*, meaning “put in order.” We all certainly need that! This is the week of ordinations - Alastair McKay, Catherine Duce ordained priests, Jo Wells as Bishop, Edith Lau and James Johnston as deacons. I remember Cath Duce a few years ago telling me she didn't think she ever could or ever wanted to wear a dog collar round her neck. How did I in my dog collar respond? Well I hope I told her to forget about all the paraphernalia, the dog collars, those clerical huddles, the appendages, the frustrations. It's not even about beautiful buildings and inspiring liturgy and incredible music, however much that helps you along the path - no, more important than anything else, we are making a choice to stand for love. Yes standing for love for the world is wounded.

My father preached at my ordination. I grew up listening to many of his sermons, but sorry to say, after his passing I could remember very little of his sane and gentle wisdom. Perhaps it was because he lived it rather than spoke it. But I do remember what he said at my ordination. He said: “What better vocation could anyone be given than the call to stand for love - to love and to be loved and to spend ones whole life doing it.” That at its very heart is the vocation of all Christians. Think about it - your vocation is to show people something of the height, breadth and depth of God's love and to do it not just with words but with your life. What could be more needed in the divisions of our world today than to stand for love.

Jesus in today's Gospel sends out his disciples simply as they are. They have no bribes, no gifts, no incentives other than to be bearers of good news. They have no £350 million on the side of a bus, they are not going to cut immigration or protect our borders. Rather they will be sent out to cross borders. And they are stripped, as it were, of all artifice and deception. They are the ones who must become somehow the bringers of peace. Peace, it's a vital word. It's a vital gift - when that gift is not only offered but also shared then peace will rest upon that person. But it's not going to be at all easy. He sends them like lambs among wolves and he warns them of rejection saying: “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

At those ordinations this week we witnessed the afterglow of those sent out - those whose lives had been lit up by the Holy Spirit. At those ordinations it's like you can literally see Christ shining in them like beacons. It's a gift being offered through them to you the witness. But of course it's not just about loving in that initial enthusiastic rush, it's about continuing to love even when you feel the source of love may have dried up, and carrying on loving even when the journey is tough and you can't for the life of you remember why you set out. It's about loving even at the foot of the cross and outside what may seem like an empty tomb. That's why that love must be more than a sweet feeling, or a romantic vision - it must be a discipline you can fall back on, a compassion you long to share, a mercy and forgiveness that you have met in your own sins and failures and which you long for others, a generosity that is bottomless, a righteous anger that burns for a greater justice. This love is not something you can put on and take off, rather it's something incredibly costly. As costly as Christ's own death and resurrection. As costly as Mary weeping at the tomb being told by the risen Christ not to hold onto him but to stand up and become his witness. To stand up for his love.

Notice in the sending out of the disciples that the kingdom begins at the very bottom. It begins house to house, in the very home. And it's reciprocal. It's not just about those sent out by Christ. It's also about how we receive the love of God and if we are willing to receive. And there is a choice in all of this. There is the chance to say no - I prefer to reject the one who comes with the gift of life and peace. There is, as Sam pointed out in his letter, always the possibility of an even if they do not - “even if they do not, we will continue.” We will continue to live this message of God's reconciling, liberating and transforming love. Shaking off the dust from our feet and moving on. I often think of Christ weeping over Jerusalem. I think of him weeping over us now. We still have not learnt the

lessons of our unhappy divisions - but I also see Christ sending us out as messengers of his peace, or calling us to welcome the stranger and share food and hospitality, and whispering to each one of us: "The kingdom of heaven is near - as near as you make it. Stand up for my love."