

SERMON, 29 August 2020 - Romans 12.9-end, Matthew 16.21-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Let love be genuine” says St Paul. I’ve had the pleasure of weddings again – one yesterday, one last Saturday. One couple I had got to know quite well, the other less so. But when you’re planning a wedding in the middle of a pandemic, with the rules changing almost weekly, when you’re coping with telling guests that they can’t come since the numbers are reduced, when you can’t have a big reception, when you’ve got to wear masks and sit at a social distance – you have got to have a genuine love to want to go through with it. And if you have to make the horrible decision to cancel and delay – to wait another year for the wedding, and re-sort everything, and cope with the grief and the stress – you’ve got to have a genuine love. We hold all our couples in our prayers.

Even those of us who have been with that special person for more years than we care to remember – our first date was 40 years ago this November, unbelievable. After 40 years, it’s a pretty genuine love. This week I took the funeral of Frank, who had been married to Marjorie for 71 years. She was being very brave, and you could see that there had been a genuine love there. Love is stronger than death, as it says in the reading from the Song of Solomon that I used for Tom and Sally yesterday afternoon.

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned.”

Some of the love we experience is quite short term. I doubt I’ll have much contact with Tom and Sally again. That doesn’t matter – I was blessed by their love, it is a privilege to take a couple through their wedding, we were blessed by their presence (though not really in a way we can easily measure), and I have no doubt that we did a bit to build God’s Kingdom, even though we probably won’t see many results.

When a lovely couple I married years ago pop up on facebook, I do see results. Tim and Naomi’s lad has now done his GCSEs, Jess and Barry’s son Theo will soon be starting school – I smile, feel good, and have a sense of love. And that love is genuine – it may not be huge, it may not change this world, but it’s genuine.

In this depressed old world of ours, be alert for signs of love, smile at signs of love, be loving yourselves, and rejoice that love survives. I followed the second love of my life on Wednesday, with a train trip to Leeds. LNER were offering a £5 single ticket, and I have not had a trip on the new Azuma units up the East Coast main line. I trained across to Grantham, then up the main line from there, 18 minutes in Leeds, and back south.

Plenty of examples of love. The love of God who created a world that is so beautiful – the sun setting over the Trent Valley as we came back into Nottingham. The love of God, written deep into our landscape and history. We passed through Ashlockton – the village just east of Nottingham where Thomas Cranmer was born. I’ve never stopped in the village and had a wander – apparently the pub is called the Cranmer Arms. I’m missing the poetry and the depth of worship in Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer, though thank God for Choral Evensong on Radio 3. You come into Grantham and the stunning church of St Wulfram with what Simon Jenkins calls “the finest steeple in England” – it lives my eyes heavenward.

Plenty of examples of human ingenuity, human creativity – but you don’t want a ten minute diversion on why the Azuma is a wonderful train.

Plenty of examples of human love – genuine love. I watched a couple saying farewell at Leeds station – as she got on the train and he stood on the platform. It took me back almost 40 years, the pain of a farewell, that emptiness as the train pulls away. There was a family on the train at Grantham who had had a day at Skeggie. They were curled up together, daughter fast asleep on dad, he cradling his child – there’s no other word for it. That’s genuine love – and I hope the memory of a wonderful day beside the seaside gets them through the long, dark winter that’s coming up.

If you read my facebook ramblings, you’ll know I had a moment at Grantham. Last time I changed trains there was in November 2013 when I had seen my dad for the last time in hospital in Cambridge and was returning to Newcastle, where Gareth was in hospital, about a month before he died. On that journey I was feeling fragile. I remember two lovely young ladies - both originally from Eastern Europe - in the cafe, who gave me coffee and friendship when I needed it. They could see I was upset, and were the friends I needed for 20 minutes when life was really tough. I didn’t expect them still to be working in the café, indeed I wouldn’t recognise them if they were – but now the café is shut, the station pretty empty, and I wondered what those two girls are doing. Are they still living in the town, hopefully with families, hopefully secure – or have they decided they are no longer welcome in this country of ours. I’ll never know – but I offered a prayer of thanks for them, it’s the least I can do.

Peter's getting all sentimental again – why is it he always gets sentimental over “lovely young ladies”? Would I have been so likely to remember that café if the lady who served me was in her sixties, or if it had been a bloke behind the counter ...

Moving swiftly on ...

“Hate what is evil”, says Saint Paul. Do we hate what is evil? It is evil that men and women are sleeping on the streets of Derby, destroying their lives with drugs and alcohol. It is evil that the help and support that was there at the beginning of the pandemic has quietly been removed. If I hated that evil, surely I would do something about it. I don't do anything, so I can't hate it.

If we had genuine love for all people, all those made in God's image – if we really hated what is evil, we might do something about it. Just imagine if every churchgoer wrote to their MP, if we all said we would pay the tax required to ensure no one is abandoned, if every Christian in Parliament said “this treatment of people is evil, we must change it”, if every Bishop in the House of Lords demanded change from the minister responsible.

Last week, quite a lot of people got cross about whether or not “Rule Britannia” and “Land of Hope and Glory” should be sung at “The Last Night of the Proms”. Last week the body of a lady called Mercy Baguma an asylum seeker from Uganda who was living in “extreme poverty”, was found dead next to her malnourished baby in a Glasgow flat. Baguma's body was only found because of the cries of her child.

But, that's fine – you get cross about Rule Britannia. What is more important, a song or the life of a mother? In situations like this, I find myself hoping for the wrath of God to, at the least, cleanse our society – and, when I'm feeling particularly angry, punish those in control.

“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord” says Paul. But, Lord, we're tired, we've had enough, we can't do it any more, there's been a pandemic, the evil is overwhelming.

I was half watching some of the speeches made by Friday's “March on Washington”, 57 years after Martin Luther King's speech, men and women protesting against the treatment of black people in the United States. I am no expert on US politics, but I find it so depressing how the pendulum has swung back from Obama to where we are now. I look with despair, and I'm the other side of the Atlantic. What's the point of another march?

Then I caught one of the speakers – and I didn't catch his name – talking about love. How his father and his wife had both been killed in violence, yet he was trying to forgive, trying to love, trying to make change. He will keep going – and I stand in awe.

“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord” says Paul, and he could be writing to us. He also tells us to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

And so it goes on. And it gets harder. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” – I don't often feel persecuted, but when I do, blessing is not my response. We are better at “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”, and most of the time we manage to “Live in harmony with one another”, indeed we do that pretty well. Thank you.

Our Gospel reading reminds us that this is not supposed to be an easy journey. “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” That is not a message we want to hear. Peter doesn't want to hear it, he doesn't believe it, it can't be true. Jesus is short with him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It says a huge amount for Peter, that Peter doesn't turn back to Jesus and tell him what he can do with his ministry, his call. Actually, it says a huge amount for the genuineness of Peter's love for his Lord, that he will take this, and will stick with Jesus, and will continue to do his will.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” That is what we are called to do. To worship, to serve, to love – to walk with God, to share our walk and our God, with others.