

SERMON, 27 AUGUST 2022 - Hebrews 13.1-8,15,16, Luke 14.1,7-14

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

“Let mutual love continue” – what a lovely phrase. I did two wedding at St Matthew’s yesterday – and sang “Lord of the dance” twice. The first bride also went to Cambridge University, and I reminded myself that Julie and I once had the pleasure of singing “Lord of the dance” in Great St Mary’s church in Cambridge with Sydney Carter the composer conducting us all. He had come with Donald Swann to do a Sunday evening service cum entertainment, and the church was packed. Donald Swann, as many of you will remember, was the other half of Michael Flanders – and I will never forget the whole church singing the Hippopotamus song, “Mud, mud, glorious mud”. It is somewhat frightening that Julie and I were singing “Mud, mud, glorious mud” together a decade before yesterday’s bride was even born, but I think I can tick the “Let mutual love continue” box.

But the reading goes on ... “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” – and that is so, I think the posh word is, counter-cultural, that we ignore it. From the earliest age we teach our children about ‘stranger-danger’, tell them not to talk to people they don’t know, surround our schools with high fences and security barriers – and that has rolled on through life. We are obsessed with how dangerous people can be, rather than accepting that the majority of people are perfectly OK – if we start with that belief, life will be so much better.

One of my walks recently took me up through Duffield to the Ecclesbourne line, and I stood and waited for about 10 minutes until the steam train came past. The number of people who walked past me, adults, families – and just blanked me. No friendly ‘hello’, no conversation, no smile – and I’m a white man in the middle of a white village. Made me wonder what reaction I’d have got if I’d been black ... . When we drive through Allestree, so we’re safe in our own cars, when we negotiate the chicane that is Park Lane or Kings Croft, round all the cars that are parked, stopping to let people through, nipping in and out – how much nicer it is when we give the other driver a nod, a simple wave, an acknowledgement. Two years ago, when we all had to lock down, we were saying how we were missing human contact – and yet we have forgotten so quickly how important that contact is.

Our world does not show hospitality to strangers – and people working with refugees, migrants, and folk from Europe will tell you horrendous stories of how they are being treated. We don’t like those stories because we feel vulnerable, because people who are different do frighten us, people do feel

under threat – and because we feel guilty, we feel challenged, we feel under threat.

I took communion to one of our ladies a fortnight ago, and we then we sat and had a chat about finance, money, electricity bills and all the things we are all worried about. And she tells me that it is the fault of all these refugees, all these people in the boats. I pointed out that apparently our nation has a workforce shortage of a million and a half people, and any sensible country would be formalising safe routes for migrants to get here, and then using their skills and their willingness to work to fill those vacancies and boost our economy. But when the narrative of the press and the politicians is that these people are just here for benefits, I am not going to convince her.

As you know, Harry works with a charity doing community meals in Gateshead, feeding the hungry. For that you need volunteers – and one of his meals had attracted a group of volunteers who are refugees living in the community. They came first because they needed food, then they stayed to help cook and serve the meals – they are allowed to do that because it is not paid work. The other week he got a text message from one of them to apologise they couldn't come any more. The Company that has the contract to house them, has decided to move them all to Blackpool – because they can get cheaper homes in Blackpool than in Gateshead. So, on hardly any notice, all these refugees have been loaded onto buses and taken to a new place – the fact that all their support networks have gone, that the families are now having to start their, often already traumatised children, in new schools, new communities – no one cares. Harry's meal has had to close until he can find new volunteers. There are times I am ashamed of this country.

The gospel should challenge us – “mutual love” is not just loving nice people, people who love us back – mutual love is the love that took Jesus to the cross. Love hurts – love allows people to hammer in the nails, love is the spilling of blood, the tearing apart of a body. Love accepts that human beings are sinful, that human beings make mistakes, that human beings deliberately hurt other human beings – and real deep Christian love goes on loving.

We all know that we have met angels unaware – strangers who have crossed our path, people it has been a pleasure to entertain. I had a chat to a family the other week for whom this church means a great deal – not that we see them very often. I could be annoyed that they don't pull their weight in its maintenance, its worship, that they don't see the pressure we are under, that they don't share a deep faith in Jesus Christ – or I can be encouraged because of the pleasure of our conversation. I can be depressed at the weddings and baptisms we don't see much of afterwards – or I can celebrate the joy and pleasure of their mutual

love, and when I do get an email from someone saying “you met X at the wedding recently, and she says she had a great chat with you, and you’re lovely. She’s in hospital after a breakdown – can you pray for her please?” When you get an email like that, you know you’re in the right job!

When you, when we, have a positive mindset you will be able to see good in people, you will be certain enough in your faith that you can be challenged, and on the occasions when a meeting left you bruised, damaged, upset – you have enough faith, enough love, enough forgiveness, to be able to move on.

You will also stand up to evil – my family have benefitted hugely from that wonderful, multi-racial, miracle that is the NHS. We have been cared for by doctors, nurses, support staff from around the world. I am not going to be silent when I see it being dismantled.

And that’s difficult – because when you’re angry about something, mutual love is hard. Our new Archdeacon came to see me last week – the Archdeacon is basically the bishop’s fixer. They do the legal things, they phone when someone has complained about you, they keep awkward parish priests like me on the straight and narrow. I had a list of things I wanted to him. About some of the stupidity of daft Diocesan paperwork, how the Safeguarding system is not fit for purpose, how frustrating it is when we’re trying to do things in the parish and yet what we’re doing does not seem to be valued and encouraged, how I want the Church of England to change. My wife had prepared me for the meeting by telling me (as only Julie can) to stop being negative – yes, our numbers may have decreased, yes, we are two churches that need younger people, yes, one of my churches can’t pay its Parish Share in full. But there is a huge amount still to celebrate – we have coped with a huge amount of change, and we have done it without major splits, major arguments, major rows. We do worship well, we do occasional offices well. 200 people through St Matthew’s yesterday for those two weddings, 200 people who heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ – most of those 200 people who heard the Gospel yesterday heard it for the first time for a long time – that is valuable and positive. I’m glad to say our Archdeacon had done his homework, he knew how many occasional offices we do, he is grateful for our work, he encouraged me in that work, he asked if I can help give experience to some of the curates who need to learn how to do a funeral and do it well, and he assured me he wants me to stay here and continue this work (and I don’t need to worry about being handed more parishes). He offered help, support, and gratitude. “Mutual love” from an Archdeacon is an interesting concept – although, in their defence, I have been blessed with some lovely Archdeacons in my 30 years of ministry. But that is how it felt.

There's always more to do, there is always effort that needs to be made, love is always costly. There is joy and blessing in this world, and there will be joy and blessing in the next! We have a long term view – and, while we have every right to worry about the short term (after all, people's lives are being effected in the here and now), we do have to take a longer view. “The resurrection of the righteous” – how righteous we are is a moot point, but we are loved, and saved and cherished – and held in the hand of God. Amen.