

Holy Trinity Kew

Sunday 10th September 2023

Trinity 14

Love and Forgiveness

During the week, we heard news reports of a school student apparently abducted by a group of boys who were armed with machetes- as he walked home from school.

This is just one of a number of serious incidents this week – some brazen, some, no doubt fuelled by drugs or alcohol, some out and out evil. I'm asked often – have community standards slipped? Why? Could it be that the foundations have become quick sand! Could it be that the rules or commandments – so long accepted as our base have been lost!

Let me tell you this is not new. As we reflect on today's readings – that span several generations, there are conflicts and arguments and a need to find ways to resolution.

For Ezekiel (living as an exile in Babylon) God's message to him is about how he has responsibility in his community to call out wickedness. Should he stay passive he is failing in his job as a prophet to God's People. He is not responsible for resolving every conflict or every wicked act – but if he turns a blind eye then he is failing in his duty.

As we turn to the Gospel, Jesus confronts the issues of conflict within a community – perhaps even a community of faith. So, he speaks to the disciples about how to bring about restitution and resolution of an issue. It will require the parties to listen to each other – it may require extra support via a mediator and witnesses. If these things don't work then move on.

He says:

“Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.”

Like many of Jesus' instructions – these words require a strong and dedicated anchor. Paul, in today's second reading tells us:

“You must love your neighbour, as yourself. “

Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour, that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.

Perhaps, as a society today, we have forgotten the importance of love. But it's not impossible to recover – in fact we have great opportunities yet to build a better community. A community that is open, caring, free from envy, hatred, racism and party spirit.

In South Africa after years of apartheid – the transformation of that society has happened without civil war or the shedding of blood. Yes, it has a long way to go but those who once had virtually no place in society, no rights and no voice – have become citizens. Millions of people have become free. A truth and justice commission was established and people of immense love and forgiveness like Archbishop Desmond Tutu served on this board, to listen and to help both black and white people in the new path.

This requires courage and it has foundation in a desire that Christian love will prevail and overcome. I am reminded of the story I heard when we visited Coventry Cathedral some years ago. On the night of November 14, 1941, the old medieval cathedral was hit by a German incendiary bomb. It basically demolished the building leaving a tower almost intact but that's all. The next day two church wardens walked around the smouldering ruins. They noticed two oak beams laying in a cross formation – they lashed them together and stood them behind the altar- they wrote on the wall alongside the words:

“Father Forgive”.

Easy to say or write? But they meant it. Even though their beautiful church had been destroyed. After the war the people of the Cathedral determined to build on site a new Cathedral and alongside it a Centre for Reconciliation.

They also committed to a partnership for the Cathedral in Dresden (Germany) to be rebuilt with their help.

There are many stories like this from around the world. You probably know more than me. In Sierra Leone, there was a time when boys were

taken from their families, they soon became boy soldiers, they turned on their families and communities – shooting relatives and friends on a whim. When the civil war was over these boy soldiers came back to their communities and the surviving community members offered them a mini-truth and justice process and then forgiveness and restitution. They believe that even though they had committed terrible evils, that they would be better people if love won the day.

The message for the Church in 2023 is clear – we are to be like a watchtower, we mustn't turn a blind eye to evil or wickedness – yet the task of calling it out is fraught with its own bumps and hazards. Truth and Justice can prevail if love is strong. We know God was in Christ to reconcile the world to himself and the Good News of reconciliation he has entrusted to us.

So how do we deal with difficult situations today? With young thugs – or people who engage in criminal activities. Yes, punishment will often be necessary – I hear Judges looking for remorse and I hope that as a society we might be better equipped in rehabilitation and transformation.

From our scriptures today, we are challenged to think about what is the most loving way to move forward. How can I be a positive force for good, am I prepared to be involved in consensus and healing?

In all our relationships, we are bid to act gently, humbly and with love. If we do this we are more likely to enjoy differences, enjoy diversity, enjoy the mysteries that life presents.

Together let us be more aware of the need for tolerance, forgiveness and the power of love.

As St Paul would say – it is the answer to all the rules.

