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Jn 13: 33-38

Acts 11: 1-18

Authenticity

Introduction

Are there certain simple things that make your heart sing? Not necessarily the 'worthy' and grown up things, like 'the scent of a rose', or the satisfaction of a 'job well done'? But something a bit childish, or that your parents might not approve of? Last week Dave and I walked up the road from home to Poor's Allotment one evening and sat on the bench by the big pond enjoying the evening sunshine, soaking in the sense of well-being and healing demonstrated by all that growing (almost by the minute) by plants and birds and animals and drinking a beer. Non-alcoholic of course, but none the less cold and lovely. Bliss! Let's celebrate those things, those moments of being authentically ourselves, however adolescent in my case. They are precious and personal and when we watch the news we realise, may sadly be, fragile.

It is so sad that while we are enjoying beautiful weather in our gardens or the countryside close to our homes, people just like us, who love to potter around watering their plants, or to relax with a cool drink shared with loved ones after a busy day, are caught up in warfare. Sad isn't a powerful enough word, but 'gutting' isn't the sort of word we use in sermons ... But maybe it's apt as a way of summing up the visceral pain and terror suffered by so many who long for peace but have no opportunity to make. They are utterly dependent on peace talks held by powerful men who we all hope are genuine in their search for peace. Are their claims authentic? Or are these talks part of the information war? Another sort of power play?

This is of course a test of authenticity on a global scale, but testing authenticity is something we all do - avoiding online scams, choosing people to do jobs to our houses, voting in elections. For the youngest adults, authenticity is the most important value, surpassing future plans and financial well-being. Even the slightly older, but still young to us adults, the Millennials, 'want to believe that every person's apparent character represents who they truly are (their authentic self) and that the culture within organizations will encourage and enable this authenticity.' So how does the Church (capital C), and the local church (Little C), bear up under this sort of expectation? Do we walk the walk? Do we even talk the talk?

Looking at the Bible

Today's Gospel reading shows us that it's not just Gen Z who are rightly worried about authenticity. Jesus himself prioritises teaching his disciples about it.

Jesus' Command Jn 13: 34-35

"A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

If we are to love as Jesus loved, we need to think about how his love was demonstrated. When we read the Bible, we see that God sent Jesus to live here to show human beings how their lives can be transformed by love. Jesus healed, restored and forgave people. He gave everything he had to show how great God's love is. But world-changing compassion comes at a price. His mercy mission led him to a tortured death on the cross, but that wasn't the end, God raised him to life and so we have hope because we can see that not even death can quench love.

Now I don't know about you but I'm pretty daunted by the idea that I need to show that quality of love all day every day to everyone. What about you? Do you feel that you can love to the point at which you would give your life for those sitting around you in church this morning? Maybe you would for your family, but how about the rest of us?! I'm not confident that I can rise to this challenge, but I find reassurance and inspiration in the great gift of love that God has given to me and to each and every person, the gift of his Son Jesus. The Bible tells us that 'we love because he first loved us' (1 Jn 4: 19). We're not being asked for natural human love, this is a special God-given gift of love that has no limits. (1 Jn 4: 9-13) The Bible teaches us that we can hold our heads up and get on with the task of loving because Jesus has not only showed us how to love, but his death on the cross has made up for our weakness and selfishness, our lack of love, and his Spirit lives in each one of us, his followers. Our natural resources may be limited, but the Spirit of Jesus, living in us can enable us to love so that those around us can see that we are Jesus' friends.

Peter's Example

Our reading from Acts offers us an example of this principle in action. Peter had gone to Caesarea in response to God's call – it must have felt so unlikely that going into a non-Jewish home, and eating there, was part of following the Messiah. We shouldn't underestimate Peter's courage and obedience to the Holy Spirit. But because of his willingness to be used by God, even in an unlikely situation, he had seen amazing things!

People who ordinarily would have been considered to be alienated from God because they were not Jewish, had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had been baptised as a sign that Jesus had turned their life around. Now, we know from the gospels how impetuous Peter was, and how easily he said much more than was wise, so surely when he came back to the established church community to find them muttering and chuntering because he had enjoyed the hospitality of a non-Jewish home, we would probably expect there to be a flash point of some sort! But instead, Peter ‘starting from the beginning ... told them the whole story’ so that they too could share in the excitement of seeing God’s kingdom being established in the lives of even more of the people he had created and loved. He was able to show loving patience and understanding, even in a situation that in ordinary human terms we would describe as deeply frustrating. The believers in Jerusalem had pushed Peter hard but with the help of the Holy Spirit, the layer beneath the surface was just more of God’s loving character. Peter had been called to demonstrate God’s generosity to gentiles in Caesarea, and he was enabled by the Holy Spirit to also demonstrate it to the circumcised believers in Jerusalem: authentically speaking of God’s nature to those on the outside and those on the inside. ‘Loving like Jesus so that everyone could see ...’

Application

So, Peter stands as an example, but how can we follow it? Well firstly, as with all training, we should remember that ‘we are what we eat’. We need to eat a healthy diet to have a healthy body, and we need to feed on Jesus if we are to have a healthy spirit. So, let’s also make sure that rather than chewing over the things that fuel our ungodly responses, we fill our minds, our hearts and our senses with things that fill us with wonder at all that Jesus has lived and died and risen to achieve. Worshipping together, (singing, reading and reflecting on God’s word, praying for the world and encouraging one another) is a great opportunity to do this. And of course, in Holy Communion we eat and drink to remember Jesus’ great love for us and the ongoing transformation in our lives. But let’s eat well through the week too. Let’s read about him, let’s talk with others about him, yes, let’s think about ‘What would Jesus do?’ And as we school ourselves to bring Jesus into every part of our day, he will dig a well of living water in our individual and community life that will wash and energise all that we think and say and do.

Secondly, if we are to love as Jesus loved we need to pray for the long haul as well as in the short term. Pray for peace, pray for one another, pray for ourselves and pray on the spot when we’re up against it! We can get so caught up in thinking that when we pray God changes other people and situations, but we also need to remember that when we pray we make ourselves available to God so that he can change us and use us to become answers to the prayers of others.

Conclusion

We all long for authentic peace processes between Ukraine and Russia, Hamas and Israel, factions in Sudan. We all long for authentic politicians who will uphold our democracies and institutions. Who will take the lead in protecting values that maintain just global peace. And I believe that there is still enough of Christendom left for us all, people of faith and of none, to long to see that the church is authentic in its ministry. As we journey further into the vacancy, and look forward to the next steps in the recruitment process here, let's continue to love one another and to read and pray and share together so that our neighbours here in the parishes will know that our friendship with Jesus is authentic, that we are trustworthy and that the love we speak of is to be experienced here among us.