

What's love got to do with it?

Last weekend I had more friends from Australia visiting which meant there was another lunch out with even more friends. It was lovely, but as some of you will understand, it led to the singing of several tunes in response to different topics of conversation. It is amazing how many songs there are that can easily be topics that come up in conversation.

At some point at lunch on Sunday which I joined after the others had been in town for some time, the phrase – what is love – came up. It made me think of the classic Tina Turner song from 1984 – what's love got to do with it? It has been buzzing in my head ever since, and in the end I went and look up the lyrics of the chorus because I was trying to work out what it meant...

What's love got to do, got to do with it
What's love but a second hand emotion
Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken¹

Now the reason it was buzzing was because we were talking about what does it mean to say that love is a second-hand emotion? For Turner this song was about romantic relationships which aren't always based on love and can sometimes end in hurt – and it was a song for her that was in some ways autobiographical. But this isn't the only experience or definition of love. And love doesn't always end in pain, though sometimes people and situations we love may mean we also experience pain too.

Then during the week I met with a wedding couple whose marriage I am conducting in two weeks. They have chosen two readings for their wedding. One is the classic wedding reading from 1 Corinthians 13 which is what we believe about love. The second is a short paragraph about the wedding day being the start of a happy life. I was challenged by their reading choice because the couple have actually been together for over ten years, and I baptised their first child more than 5 years ago – so this is not the start, nor is it their only expression of their love. So we talked for some time about what these readings mean and why they chose them. It was really helpful. They reminded me that there are lots of new beginnings in all relationships, even ones that we hope are lifelong but that it is also important to notice the new bits – the bits which remind you that love isn't second hand or even always familiar or assumed, but growing and changing.

If I needed any confirmation of this, yesterday's parish outing helped me as well be reminded how important the little changes in light, the little pressure on the steering of the boat, the little conversations as you pass one another that help us to continue to grow. And to know where you are going.

¹ <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=1247>

Love, whether in a marriage or a community is hard work. Love in faith is extremely complicated, and often hard to quantify. Today in our next exert we have heard from Romans, Paul is trying to help the Romans, and us, understand what this might mean - that love is not a platitude of faith, but rather needs to be the hard work of our Christian life and witness.

Now Paul is not writing for the sake of it, nor is he setting down an ethic of living into a void. Paul is writing to a particular context – and his examples and statements address that context. This important for us to understand, not only in terms of how we interpret his writing – but also in terms of we share the Christian faith in our own time – we need to address the context that we live in.

So as we look at what our reading today says about love, it is important to have some understanding of first-century Roman culture. Language of obligation defined the livelihood of Roman citizens in many spheres of life. To the emperor they “owed” honour and allegiance; to their benefactor (if they had one, and many likely did), they owed also money, possessions, honour; slaves owed service and their very lives; wives owed submission, and so on. It is worth inquiring where and how “obligation” culture works in the present day.

When Paul exhorts his audience to “owe” nothing except love, he is in a sense reconfiguring the arrangement of the furniture. To owe nothing except love eliminates the structures inherent in the ethic of the Roman cultural narrative. If obligation was related to position and to upholding status, authority, or certain relational dynamics, Paul’s exhortation to owe nothing except love forces some rethinking². He is challenging the construct of power within the society and therefore the dynamic of relationships within it. This is exactly what Jesus had done in Judea as well. God’s love redefines the nature of power and it is hard to get a grip on. It is so hard in fact that 2000 years later we still are addressing the same issues.

Last week I reminded us that to do this will likely mean for us as individuals and a community giving up the power that we have. Today’s readings push us to consider how we might do this. To owe nothing but love to one another is to own the reality that we all are completely dependent on God’s grace for not only our forgiveness, but for our very existence, and it reframes how we live in relation to one another in our everyday interactions. It reframes it in such a way that other obligations become significantly less reality shaping than they once were.

But while we talk about love a lot in Christian faith, it often does seem second-hand or something that has been used and is not something we have a strong ownership of. How do we embrace our obligations to love one another in new and vibrant ways? How do we let our commitment to God’s love shape and re-shape our lives.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3401

Our Gospel reading, which in honesty I find quite a difficult one to unpack – does start to address what some of this shaping might look like – from God’s perspective at least anyway.

Jesus tells his disciples that what they bind or loose on earth is also bound or loosed in heaven. This is both a startling grant of authority and a warning to the disciples. With authority comes profound responsibility, especially when the community represents God’s presence and power in the world. But what does binding and loosing really mean?³ Well scholars have argued for many years that it is about determining the boundaries of the community, and in some ways settling disputes – but this still doesn’t get to the heart of what Jesus is trying to address – it is not so much about the boundaries or even the rule – rather it is about the relationship. And in this sense it speaks into the nature of love which God is trying to *bind on earth* so to speak.

It is too easy to not put this passage from Matthew into context and to see it as another attempt in this gospel to set down legal rules. So often because of Matthew background we jump to the legal and factual. But there is something more here in Jesus teaching about how we go about living in relationship with one another – and as we know from our own families – settings rules doesn’t always provide the only structure for the ways that we relate to each other.

David Lose⁴ (who I have quoted before) suggests that loosing and binding may perhaps not be promises of unlimited power but instead invite extreme caution before setting anything in stone as the way we regard others on earth has cosmic significance. And seeking agreement with others in the community is not a formula to force God’s hand to grant us what we want, but instead is the promise that when Christians come together to discuss, listen for, and discern God’s will, nothing is out of our reach. And the assurance of Jesus’ presence is both a reminder that what we say and do together is always said and done in the presence of our Lord and a promise that the hard work to which we set ourselves is not done alone, but always with Jesus’ presence and assistance.

The nature of Christian love within this model then sets as its parameters the time to listen to each other’s opinions, to work together to find answers, to set as few rules in concrete as possible. The heart of this of course is that we are mindful that every decision, each conversation takes place in the presence of God, and so this too should be part of our decision making.

When we look at the Global, and even local conflicts which face our community at this time how much might be achieved if we took time to discuss, listen and even discern what God might be saying. What if we made fewer definite assertions of power, and recognised that we all have power? And how do we, as a tiny Christian

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3392

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-14-a-christian-community/>

community on the edge of central London speak into this events and decisions?
How do we model listening and care in decision making?

Yesterday on our pilgrimage up the River Ouse, we could only travel 4 miles an hour. It meant we had to stop, to listen, to watch – to notice. This calm seemed to frame our whole day.

There is so much that is challenging in our world just now – from hurricanes to displays of hate, from injustice to intolerance – that the world desperately needs us to be the Body of Christ. Being an authentic community is hard, being a loving community is hard. But also powerful. And healing. And a tremendous witness.

When we feel weary, when our love for God might feel second hand, perhaps we can remind each other that we have Jesus' promise that each and every time we try, God is there – instructing us in the way of love and inviting us to take time to notice and be different. And it is this witness that will bring change – for us and the world. Amen.