

Last Sunday I watched again – just cause it was on – Paddington 2. There are so many lovely moments in that movie, which are also lessons for life. Paddington is for me a symbol of the potential of what the Kingdom of God could be like for all of us. The lessons Paddington’s Aunt Lucy teaches him may well seem simple and almost naïve – and yet they are a vision of a community built on love and justice. ‘If we’re kind and polite the world will be right!

But as was reading through the readings set for today the line which keep coming back from the movie, was one spoken by Knuckles, the most forceful prisoner Paddington encounters. When Paddington first meets this man he says ‘ I don’t do nothing for no one for nothing!’ This is an abhorrent thought for a bear raised to be polite and to always help others in need.

The danger of the opening phrase of our passage from Roman’s today is that we hear ‘Owe no one anything’ – in a similar tone - and many stopped listening at this point. But the sentence finishes – except to love! Which turns the context upside down. As we continue to unpack this letter to the Romans today we find that Aunt Lucy was right about many things – at the heart of all life, at the heart of the kingdom of God is the need to Love our neighbour.

Now Love, whether in a relationship 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 – or a twee message expressed in children’s literature, 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 we too 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 us considering 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

rethinking¹. 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 and it reframes how we live in relation to one another in our everyday interactions.

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.

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.

Matthew records his memory of how Jesus instructed them to address conflict or concerns within their community. The challenge is that this passage has been used throughout the history of Christian Church for how disagreements are managed, and the authority that a community to bind in the name of Christ. But like all scripture this has been open to misuse. Like many things, the same rules can be used to oppress as easily as they can be to release and liberate. One of the questions that this passage from Matthew has always raised for me is 'how do we know we are on the right side of right?' how do we know it is us that should be challenging behaviour and not the other way around.

And of course the answer is in the context. We have been working through the texts from Matthew and Romans for some months now, and there are patterns which we see emerging. Both Paul and Matthew can sound quite harsh at times in their language and have strong opinions about how faith in Christ should be lived out. But while we read their books in small passages, this is not how they were written. They were also written to be read aloud – not as a book.

This Chapter of Matthew is all about the vulnerable. It begins by the most vulnerable, a small child, being placed in their midst while the disciples are arguing about greatness and invites them to redefine their assumptions and criteria. Matthew's Jesus is constantly redefining greatness along the lines of humility rather than power – and all that we read in this chapter needs to be read with that in mind².

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3401

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-14-a-community-rules/>

This passage on addressing conflict could be read – and has been read as a list of rules defining how we should address conflict – first you raise it in private, then with a small audience and so on. But if we read this passage with the vulnerable in mind the emphasis is more on ‘don’t give up’. If someone is struggling, if someone is in trouble – don’t let them struggle alone in pain, rather keep trying to help, keep trying to love them, keep trying to support them. Help them have the changes they need to be whole. And for me the most important part of this passage is in the last line, because it promises that while we are doing this, God is with us. “if you can just get a certain number of people to agree and pray, God will do it” (v19) At the heart of this passage is the promise that when we heal our divisions and come together, God is powerfully at work and nothing is impossible. Jesus promises that when we are about this work – that is, when we come together as a community to address our differences, resolve our disputes, seek to end conflict, and repair relationships – he is there³.

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 – and to do all of this with the most vulnerable in our midst and aware that every decision, each conversation takes place in the presence of God.

How then do these two images about love inform our way forward as a congregation and a community? Over the coming months we are going to have some time to consider how we seek to be a community in this place now that we are one congregation. It will also be a time to consider how we might grow, and what projects we might like to be involved in. This will include things from what time our service is, to the type of worship we enjoy, to activities we are involved in.

We will be asking these questions at a time in history when how we love our neighbour, and how we care for the most vulnerable amongst us has taken on a new meaning. One of the unexpected outcomes of the pandemic has meant we have all had to be a bit more flexible about how we do things – often in ways we might not have considered in the past. We have had to change whether we wanted to or not. We have had to learn – what is important.

This may well be our gift as we share in conversation together, in God’s presence – seeking and listening for how we live in the place. In the end, we will be shaped by our ability to love, our ability to let go of power, and our openness to hear God’s voice. Amen.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-14-a-community-rules/>