

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 aren’t 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!

As we continue to unpack the 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

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

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. 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.

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 actions? 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 seek to be shaped by our ability to love, our ability to let go of power, and our openness to hear God's voice. Amen.

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