

"Love Actually"

Sunday 5 July 2009

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Readings:

1 Corinthians 13

Psalm 136: 1-9

Matt 22: 34-40

Sermon

What do you reckon are the priorities of most 12 year old girls?

Some of you have daughters around that age - and you are probably the most knowledgeable for answering such a question - but I won't ask you since it might ignite a row over Sunday lunch of the "Mum how could you say that?" type!

There are others who work with 12 year old girls - they could answer more safely - responses? (Boys, clothes, music, make-up??)

Back in the 1970's I seem to recall it was very similar - just the details were different - the celebrities were David Cassidy & Donny Osmond & a young Michael Jackson - the clothes were AWFUL and the music met the disapproval of one's parents!

Further back in 1922, there was a 12 year old girl called Agnes, and she made a radical decision - to live her life for God and for the poor. From the age of 12 onwards, Agnes pursued this vision each day with such fierce determination that when she died she left behind a legacy of 517 missions, orphanages, schools, and homes caring for the dying, despised, and forgotten in a hundred countries.

We don't think of her as Agnes, because we know of her as Mother Theresa - and in 1979 when this amazing old lady accepted the Nobel Peace prize, (OHT) she urged all the important people present to "Live life beautifully" because:

"God loves me and I have an opportunity to love others as he loves me, not in big things, but in small things with great love"

In the reading that Rob read this morning, Jesus was at the sharp end of one of those conversations where someone is very determined to catch you out or make you look stupid.

Some of us were talking about this kind of thing on Tuesday evening.... when the person at work says "Do you believe in God then??" and as soon as you say yes, which in itself isn't always easy, you are bombarded with:

"What's God ever done for you then?"

"Do you believe in heaven as well?"

"What about the Muslims, cos their heaven must be very different - what's that about then?"

On Tuesday night we agreed that there are often times in that kind of situation when we might have to end up saying "I don't know" or "I struggle with that too, but I still believe that God loves me".

The conversation Jesus had been having here before the reading Rob read for us was when the Sadducees had come and posed him a bit of a challenge....they asked him about marriage and about resurrection.

The Bible often talks about "the Pharisees and the Sadducees" these two important groups of religious people – and the big difference between them was that

The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection (cue for the old joke "that's why they were sad, you see") so the Sadducees were trying to catch Jesus out with this hypothetical situation of a man who died, and his widow married his brother because that was how she could be looked after, and he died, so she married the next brother - until she'd seen off all 7 brothers and the Sadducees poser was

"At the resurrection - whose wife will she be?"

And Jesus wasn't fazed by this and said "you lot haven't read the scriptures properly have you? - because life after the resurrection will be different to life now, but don't be in any doubt there will be a resurrection.

The Pharisees didn't like the Sadducees but they didn't want to be outdone in posing a difficult question to Jesus.

"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees", they wanted to ask him a tricky question too. There were 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, so "Which commandment do you think is most important?" was one of those questions that religious people often debated in those days - probably not over a pint in the pub, but maybe in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

The answer Jesus gave them may not have surprised his listeners. They might actually have agreed with him. They're familiar words to many of us because Brian often reads them as part of the Communion service, before the confession, but we might be surprised where Jesus knew them from.

The answer is in the footnotes at the bottom of the page - Deuteronomy 6v5 and Leviticus 19v18.

Jesus' listeners would all have known that was where they were from, but I suspect it might be a bit of a surprise to us as 21st Century Christians? We much too easily dismiss the Old Testament as focussing on a God of Judgement, while the New Testament is about the God of love.

But that is too simplistic – God is the God of past, present and future, and as today's Psalm reminded us:

"His love endures forever"

The Old Testament book of Leviticus was handbook for priests and Levites outlining their duties in worship, and a guidebook of holy living for the Hebrew people. It is full of detailed stuff about sacrifices and festivals and very harsh punishments for sin, but there in a list of various laws in chapter 19, is verse 18 which says:

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord"

Deuteronomy has lots of the OT laws in it too... it was written for the generation of the people of Israel who were entering the Promised Land. It was a reminder to them of what God had done for their parents and grandparents, and how he wanted them live in the land he was giving them.

Deuteronomy 6: 4 - 5 are key elements of the Hebrew Shemah - the prayer with which devout Jewish men would begin and end each day - and would hope to be their last very words before death:

"Hear O Israel, The Lord our God the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"

Mark records Jesus' answer to this question as

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" - Matthew doesn't mention strength, but it was there in the Shemah

And Jesus said this was the most important commandment.

And it's one I have never been able to keep.

In fact - there's not been a single day yet in the more than 30 years I have been following Jesus when I have been able to keep that commandment from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep.

So maybe that is why it is a good reminder to us to have these words of Jesus read to us before we confess how unworthy we are to share communion? We can so easily get into the mindset of thinking:

"I'm not quite perfect but hey I do ok....I mean - I lost my temper with my children yesterday but they were being so silly in the heat".....

or

"I was going a bit fast but the road was clear and the visibility was good and who set that ridiculous limit there anyway?"

But when we think of how we fail to love God with all that we are, it is rather more significant than the odd grumpy response or minor traffic offence.

Asked if we Love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength, I don't know about you, but for me it's not just that I don't quite manage like the speedometer reaching 32 mph in a 30 zone.....this is something I fail completely.

I don't expect I will ever manage it completely in this life... but I do hope to love him better as the years go by, and the more I experience his love, the more I might just be able to respond to it better.

The reading that Karen read – Paul's famous chapter on love from 1 Corinthians 13 talks about the present life being imperfect and incomplete when we see the Lord as a fuzzy reflection in an old mirror but that one day what is imperfect will be replaced by what is perfect what is incomplete will be made complete, and then I WILL be able to love God with all that I am.

And then there is the second commandment – about loving our neighbour as ourselves.

And Jesus wasn't just limiting the word neighbour to the folk next door..... but the people we meet in the course of our lives.... colleagues at work, people at the bus stop....other road users.....other people at church.

Love the other people at church as much as I love myself. That's quite a tall order.

The New Testament was written in Greek and the Greek language has 4 different words for love.

These are Eros, Stergos, Philos and Agape

Don't sit there thinking I understand Greek - I don't – it really is almost all Greek to me but I HAVE read about these 4 words, and they give a different perspective on the word love for people like us who use the same word for love when we say

"I love my husband"

to "I love dark chocolate"

or "I love sitting out in the garden on a hot summer evening"

The Greek word Eros was entirely to do with passionate love between a man and a woman - sensual desire, longing. It's where we get the word erotic from. And it doesn't crop up in the New Testament at all - though that doesn't mean that God disapproves of such love - Song of Solomon would seem to refute that - but that was Old Testament so it wasn't written in Greek.

Stergos is the word used to describe affection and was usually applied to the love between family members - and Stergos isn't a word used in the NT either. But the principle of family members loving each other is a Biblical one, even if the word itself isn't used.

Philos is the Love word used when friends care for one another – it is the word used in the conversation between Peter and Jesus on the lakeside when Jesus asks Peter 3 times if he loves him.

Agape – is God's love, the love that endures forever.... the love which is the result of a determined decision to love and go on loving.

1 Corinthians 13 is famous at weddings – and it is a good reminder to a man and woman who on their wedding day are most likely to feel totally in love, that days will come when the feelings are replaced by less noble feelings... during the worse times, in sickness, when they feel poorer and love has to be worked at, and kindled back into life.

But Paul didn't write this to a couple getting married – it was written to a church in conflict. And we could think, well, they were one of the early churches when people still had contact with living people who met with Jesus when he was on earth.

Not like us 2000 years on. But the church in Corinth, who had this letter written to them, was in a mess! They had issues by the bucket load and cans of worms which were huge catering sized cans!

The church in Corinth was beset by moral issues – sexual problems including a publicly known about incestuous relationship between a man and his mother or stepmother.

They had issues about their worship style which ran deeper than how loud they had the music or how long the sermon was.

They were very proud of their Spiritual gifts, and liked to show off their abilities to prophesy and speak in tongues.

So Paul wrote this passage into that context – that never mind their Spiritual gifts – none of them were worth anything if they didn't love one another.

The love they were called to was to love like Jesus loves:

Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind,

Jesus does not envy, Jesus does not boast.

Jesus is not proud, or rude, or self seeking

Jesus is not easily angered, and keeps no record of wrongs.

Jesus does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth

Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Is my love anything like that? Is yours?

After the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples before his death, he said this to them:

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples – that you love one another”

Our community would be convinced we are following Jesus if they looked at us and saw:

The people at St Philip's are patient and kind to each other,

They aren't envious or boastful, or proud, or rude, or self seeking

Those people at St Philip's are not easily angered, and keep no record of wrongs.

They don't delight in evil, but rejoice with the truth

They always protect and trust each other, they are always hopeful, and they always persevere.

To go back to Mother Theresa's words:

"God loves us and we have an opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love"