

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Romans 12:9-21

31st March 2019

Spirit... move us from the comfort of our pews... challenge the familiar ideas we have... call us into places we do not yet know... and inspire us to leave with our faith re-imagined... So be it... Amen

In between the launch of the festival programme... and an excellent and inspiring conversation with a couple of artists... wanting to take part in the festival and run a workshop to paint the wooden windows at the back of the stable block... and while we were standing among some fabulously huge willow and tissue puppet heads made by folk at Gartnavel Royal that they had lent us for the launch... and all the great positive atmosphere of a church whose edge was generously overlapping with the edge of our local community... I got a phone call...

It was from a colleague... It went like this... "Roddy... what do you do with problem members?"...

I paused... because it was hard to think of any problem members in New Kilpatrick... "Och"... I said to him... "We don't have any"...

It was his turn to pause... then laugh... but due to pastoral confidentiality... I can't reveal the rest of the conversation to you... though I suggested he should maybe drop a line to the Prime Minister... who clearly has more experience with this than I do...

When he told me what the problem was... it really came down to relationships... as it usually does... And the way to respond to that... is usually an even deeper relationship...

Church is not a business... you can't tell people how to behave... There is no rule that says if you come into this place... everyone will treat you in this particular way... You can suggest it... but you can't enforce it... unlike Macdonalds or Starbucks... controlled catch phrases... pinned back smiles... and "have a nice day" with every bid mac...

The bottom line is that the Body of Christ... is as St Benedict said... "a school of souls"... that aren't perfect... and we don't always get it... and we don't always live up to the gospel... and there are times when we aren't even good...

But we are loved... unconditionally... just as we are...

And when we encounter someone... who is perhaps "difficult"... and include the minister in that one... you get to love them... and in that process... you get a sense of how God loves you... And folks looking on... get to see how much we mean what we say... about the church being entrusted with love...

One of the things about doing what we do as church... is always to let people see... and experience... and know how much we mean what we say... about the church being shaped and honed and fulfilled by love...

We complicate it with membership vows... and rituals... and creeds and doctrine... Even the idea of denominations make it more difficult for people to see that we mean about church and love and grace and gospel...

It is a peculiar thing we have done... when we are essentially about love... to live as if we have unloved a whole group of people... and done it in God's name... when our denominationalism takes over... and we are always competing for people's attention and loyalty and membership... Ecumenism is a response to something that ought never have happened... in a church that speaks of love...

But one of the beauties of a festival... which we have opened up this morning... is that it is not about membership... Indeed doing the festival has no advantage to us at all... other than doing our most important task... doing what we essentially are called to do... to be the love of God... the Body of Christ in the world... offering common ground for every one of us to meet each other...

That works... perhaps... because we find common ground in things none of us have perhaps ever tried before... It's a level playing field... no experts... unlike church where it can be difficult for people to come... because there is a certain entry requirement of knowing what to do... and a certain expertise of what things mean...

What we offer for ten days in May... is a common meeting place for everyone... where the only thing we share is we all have mental health... and as a church... with the wider community... we invite ourselves and our neighbours to meet on that common ground... a place to love each other that is not our own familiar ground...

Because what is unique about being the Body of Christ is that it is not the church... The Body of Christ is each of us... being the love of God... out in the world... among our neighbours...

In effect... we aren't the Body of Christ... until we leave here... because only then... can people see... we mean what we say... about being about love... It is much easier to love each other here... It is more difficult... yet more honest... to love folk we don't know... or rarely engage with... on ground we are unfamiliar with...

But the Bible give us some help in this... offers a tick list almost... by Paul... who is not always the clearest of thinkers in my opinion... But he does have moments of glory... and perhaps this is one... where he offers a whole series of examples of living through love...

Let your love be genuine... hate what is evil... hold fast to what is good... love one another with mutual affection... Rejoice with those who rejoice... weep with those who weep... Live in harmony with one another... do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly... do not claim to be wiser than you are... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all...

You know... what if we dared read that every morning before we got out of bed... What if we replaced all our creeds with these words... What if... all the national church's radical action plans were rewritten and began with Paul's thoughts... What if parliament read together this passage in unison before any and every debate...

It won't happen... At the moment our country only seems to agree on what it doesn't want... a negative and unimaginative and rather hopeless way to engage the world...

Love works the other way around however... these words... turn the whole national debate on its head... responding positively... living optimistically... speaking generously... It is who we are to be as a church... on common ground where church and community find a shared meeting place... that none of us own or control... and tell stories and listen to each other... where our edges cross and we change the relationships we have...

This is how we live as the Body of Christ... this is how people can see what we mean by the love of God... this is our work... our purpose... our call... in festival... in the ordinary... in parish... in community... in faith... and in love...

Let us be that love of God... for a world... a nation... a community and parish... that needs that love so badly...