

## NAURC worship at Fairland URC, Wymondham

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020

John 15: 12-17 and Romans 12: 9-19

> It probably says something about my age - if I try to think of a song containing the word 'love' – first on my list is “All you need is love” by the Beatles, followed by “Love me do”.

> Apparently the word 'love' was used 613 in their lyrics – I do wonder about who counted them all, and perhaps they should get out more!

> Do you have any favourites?

> Interestingly the Beatles are well ahead of the New Testament count at 228, so a computer search programme told me, with John's Gospel coming out on top with 39 mentions.

> I've lost count of the number of times I have included 'love' in my sermons – probably most weeks for nearly 12 years of ministry!

> But here we are again taking 'love' as the theme for our reflections today.

> Last week I spent some time examining a text from Matthew 16 in which Peter declares his heart-felt belief that Jesus is “the Son of the Living God”. This flowed into how I think it is that theological rock on which the church and our lives as followers of Jesus is founded.

> The Epistle set for today in the lectionary comes from Romans and fits perfectly to develop the theme that we started last week.

> We have a church founded on Jesus ,the Son of the Living God – and today's text provides us with a whole list of ways we can put this into practice. In the NRSV this section is titled “Marks of the True Christian”. I'd like to add 'Marks of the True Church' onto that as well, because Paul was writing to one of the first communities based on Jesus – followers of the Way as they were often called in those days – that we now call church.

> To add a new perspective on the text I have laid it out in bullets points – and it's amounted to 20 of them – and that is far too many to look at in one sermon.

> This passage would be better suited to a retreat to have the time to delve into them all -there's a thought.

> What I plan to do, briefly this morning though, is look at just one point-the first point:

“Let love be genuine”.

> Sounds easy doesn't it?

>But, as with so much of our faith, there is depth to this instruction and it's also not quite as easy to achieve either.

> We begin with some more insights from scholars who can help us discover more about the way that the original language for the New Testament works.

> One such example is the sentence in John 15 often used on Remembrance Sunday; *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*

> The words ‘love’ and ‘friends’ are closely related as a commentary says: *“These words for love and friendship in John are practically synonyms, describing each one in terms of the other.”* And the whole passage is Jesus asking the disciples to love each other – in a way that embodies His love for them.”

> As we read on, Jesus goes on to affirm that connection between the unique form of love that he came in person to express and friendship.

> He goes on to say to the disciples: *“I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”*

> ‘Let your love be genuine’ and when we get that right as individuals and as church we will be sharing in friendship with Jesus – sharing His love.

> It is that important – we can share something of Jesus in being ‘genuine’ in our love.

> Well that all sounds a bit holy – and should be easy ..... or is it?

> The instruction from Paul is not – ‘just look genuine when you are at church, or when someone else is watching to see what you do.’

> This is not an act that can be switched on and then off again. Being genuine in love is what we aim to do all the time.

> Not so easy is it? What about that person who has just been rude or dismissive, ignored you or told you that your help isn’t needed? Or that neighbour who is driving you up the wall – or that person on the TV being racist or spouting hatred, or gleefully spreading violence. What about them? How can we manage to genuinely love someone like that? I wish I knew, but I’m just as human as everyone else, and there are times when I am a million miles away from genuine love for *some* people.

> By the way – if you struggle as much as I do – turn to bullet point 20: *“leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’*

> How ever much anger you may feel at some of the most outrageous behaviour that goes against all your moral and human and faith values – we are not the ones to judge – and we are certainly not the ones to avenge. Just bear in mind that it is God’s judgment and its immeasurable consequences that actually matter.

> We have something to strive for, something to aim for – to embody the values of the Son of the Living God as we try to ‘let our love be genuine’.

> If we can get the hang of it, then genuine friendship will be one of those attributes, that I talked of last week, something that will shine out and will make us different from so many others – and that will, I hope, attract others to want to discover it for themselves.

> It may be as simple as sharing round your garden produce – we have done very well recently with some runner beans and some tomatoes – by the way; if anyone would like some cooking apples the tree in the manse garden has had a bumper year.

> Or it may be a phone call or a quick chat when you meet someone out and about. Another great idea is the way that Jennifer has kept several people in touch by sharing photos and stories on e-mail during lockdown. Or there is the ad-hoc 'bring your own' coffee morning that has sprung up at Ipswich Rd as well as the on-line one that Audrey runs on Zoom.

> Top of the list has to be the incredible work that the food banks have been doing during the difficult days of lockdown – and the terrific service of the Roman Catholic church in Wymondham which has been providing help on similar lines.

> That's what genuine friendship/ love looks like in action – and I expect you can find as many other examples as you can find songs with 'love' in the title.

> There is another aspect of 'let your love be genuine' that I wish to remind us about as well.

> In the commentary on the passage that I consulted, the author, Frank Crouch, reminds us that love can go off in the wrong direction if we aren't careful.

> Our attention can become a passion, it might even slip into addiction and our love can become diverted away from our calling to discipleship. (see John 15: 16).

> We can end up loving the wrong things, or maybe the wrong people. Whatever it may be, that will cause us to turn our backs on God – which is, of course, the definition of sin.

> It's so easy to fall into this trap that then takes us over and suddenly our love becomes far from genuine. It's then the wrong sort of love that breaks down friendships or makes them dysfunctional. And at this point I could get all judgmental and give you a long list of 'thou shalt nots' – or I could remind myself that judgment of behaviour and its motivation lies with God – and is not for me.

> The disciples were a mixed bunch – and I am of the firm view that they included women too – there are occasions in the Gospels when the disciples didn't get on – but they were all different people who had been drawn together under the same common purpose – they were all called by Jesus. And they were all called friends by Him.

> It's on this model that the church grew and has carried on doing so ever since – all the way along to us.

> I know our views all vary on all sorts of subjects – but let us return to that core principle of last week:

> We are all together because Jesus has asked us, and we are exploring what it means to say to Him "You are the Son of the Living God" – and as we work that one out we are assured of the friendship of Jesus that we share as genuine love in our communities and beyond.

Amen

