

Loving Our Neighbours

A Sermon in St Hilda's, UH 10 September 2017 by Rev Rosemary Wright

Romans 13: 8 – 14

After more years than I would like to admit to, I have decided that I am a slow learner!

It has always intrigued me that I find some of the books of the Bible easier to come to grips with than others, and enjoy reading them, and relate to, but that some I will really struggle with, or shy away from, even perhaps avoiding altogether. While I've known this for a very long time, I have not understood a reason for it. May be it is because I don't fully want to hear the messages some writers offer, or it may be something to do with the styles in which some books are written: but avoid some books, I do.

Having led a wide variety of study groups over more than 30 years, it has always interested me to hear how differently people respond to the same information. How a person will respond in the light of their own life story and experience; how some take a passage literally, and cannot get past the information it gives. How others quickly see past the information, and can relate it to their own life, can internalize it. How yet others turn stories into metaphor, and work in the metaphor, and I guess I am one of those.

We hear much about personality types, are we extrovert or introvert, sensate or intuitive, thinking or feeling, judging or perceiving types, and I am sure that our own personality type largely affects how we think and how we behave. But rather than thinking that someone else is wrong because they see things differently from ourself, I think it is important to appreciate that while either may seem right or wrong for either person, rather it is what we do with our interpretation that matters.

So when I am faced with the writings of St Paul, for example, I have to make a tremendous effort, because I find his writings really difficult. And I have to work

out of the side that does not come easily to me. When I am faced with the Gospels, especially St John, then I can settle in much more comfortably.

But today I am going to bite the bullet, and try to understand something of St Paul's writing, as in our Epistle Reading for this morning.....

I have sometimes wondered why we have a choice when we come to the reading of the Law in our liturgy which starts on page 404; (you might want to turn to page 406). We can either read the Ten Commandments in full, which God gave to Moses (Exodus 20); or as a summary of the Law, as we read in today's epistle, written by Paul, or as a new Commandment, which Jesus gave to his followers (John 15:12). Three different ways of expressing a similar truth, but each style written to a different kind of audience living in very different times.

Following this commandment to love, Paul, in his epistle for this morning, tells us that we owe no-one anything except love, emphasizing that love is all inclusive of the sacrificial way we should treat our neighbours, loving others as we love ourselves. (Leviticus 19:18) Sacrificial? Sacrificial because we none of us needs to be reminded that it is not always easy to love someone we may find difficult even to like. Sacrificial? Because we are asked to love someone who comes from a directly opposite standpoint from ourselves. Maybe we get confused between loving the person, and loving what they do and say. And maybe we need to be reminded that Paul is not only speaking of loving followers of Jesus, rather he is saying that the Christian way to love is to love all people irrespective for example of their religious persuasion, or their genetic orientation, in a Christlike way. Maybe we need to remember too that what Paul is saying is not exclusively Christian, for after all, he was himself fundamentally a Jew, a Jew who persecuted Christianity vigorously before his conversion; he is actually quoting the Old Testament Hebrew pre Christian Law, and the Law of the land. Hence the Christian love that Paul was talking about was both a fulfilment of the Old Testament Law, and the Law of the land, and was the channel through which the new life that Jesus brought to his followers would be fulfilled.

And then the Epistle moves into a new phase.

Paul is telling his followers that the time has come for a new beginning. With Jesus, the old age has passed, and the new age is beginning. The early Christians were under the impression that the death of Jesus and his resurrection, heralded a time of waiting for Jesus to return. Hence this belief is reflected by Paul's warning – to be ready for that time. He goes through a list of what he considers to be the greater sins of the day, reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. And Paul tells the people to put away these works of darkness, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul uses this metaphor in several of his writings, to the extent that it is easy to think of Paul as the man who changed his clothes rapidly. 'Put off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light.'

The same contrast that Jesus used of light against darkness, of good against evil.

For Paul, the fact that he mentions armour suggests that this new life which Jesus brought was not a life that would happen without a struggle. That they have to equip themselves with an armour which helps them to live out the life of light. That they have to be ready for the persecutions handed out by those who think differently from themselves.

Now it might be easier for us to stop at this point, but I don't believe that Paul's teaching was just for the people of the time when he wrote or preached. We are reminded in the media frequently that the sins of Paul's day were very little different from the sins of our modern society. And I believe that we should look at them in terms of our present day, both in the light of our current world cultures, and in terms of our own personal way of life.

We hear and read in the daily media of atrocities and fundamental breakdown in relationships between peoples all around the world. Of vast numbers of refugees leaving their own countries because of abuses handed out to them by their own people, whether through warfare or starvation; threats of aggressive behaviours between nations, all add to the works of darkness that happen around the world.

There does seem some urgency to me that the world puts these aggressions to rights, so how can so-called civilized nations do something creative to reflect the

Christian way of life. How can we influence worldwide oppression from our small position as New Zealanders, less than five million people.

Last week I and many others I'm sure, received a letter from our local Hospice, with their current news. This included their plan to raise 10 million dollars for their rebuild. And they stated that if each family in the Hutt Valley were to find \$87 for the Hospice, then the 10 million would be raised.

And this got me thinking. If each New Zealander were to provide one dollar a year, that would raise nearly 5 million dollars for a National Refugee Fund. If each New Zealander were to provide 10 dollars a year, the price of two cups of coffee in Upper Hutt, or one Big Mac Combo, at Macdonalds, that would raise about 50 million dollars for the Fund. This could be used to increase the number of refugees we can welcome into New Zealand, and would help to provide achievable housing, hospital beds, school places and similar reasons given for not increasing our intake of refugees. If this were a World Wide Fund, then the horrific pictures I watched last night on BBC World of refugees having their babies on the side of the road, and nowhere to shelter, and no food or water, might become a thing of the past. I'm sure this is a simplistic picture, but what can we, you and I, do to help the situation?

Firstly, I think we have to start with ourselves. It could be easy for us to come into St Hilda's, and think we have all got our lives together. We may feel warm and cosy in each others' company, especially with the new heaters! , and hopefully we are, but what does this do for countries such as North Korea? My husband, along with other United Nations soldiers fought against North Korea more than sixty years ago. And yet aggression is still their way of life. What about the waste of life and money, and all the pain and devastation that those years between have brought?

I think we have to take very seriously the time of confession we use every Sunday, if not daily, and think very hard about the wrongdoings in our own lives, yes, in our own lives, that Paul might describe as works of darkness. How can we lead more Christlike lives, loving our neighbours as Christ loves us, to form part of a worldwide movement of light. How can we individually and personally put on the

armour of the light of Christ? And how might Paul encourage us, as he speaks out the Commandments in a way that they are relevant for us today?

And while this may seem to an observer to have very little effect upon the troubles of the rest of the world, I'm sure there is something in the metaphor of taking a small bite at the large biscuit nearest to ourselves, rather than trying to demolish it all in one mouthful. Amen.