

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Pentecost 14

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Readings: Song of Songs 2: 8-13; Psalm 45: 1-2, 6-9.
James 1: 17-27; Mark: 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

“Is Love All We Need?”

The Predictability of Christian Teaching

There is an old story about a Sunday School teacher who thought that her teaching had become dull and predictable and therefore causing boredom among her infant students; so she decided to do something new. At the next class she tried a story based on life rather than on the Bible. She asked the group of five-year olds: “Who can tell me what is grey and furry and lives in a gum tree?” The children were perplexed by this new approach and thought it was a trick, so they said nothing.

“Come on,” the teacher coaxed, “someone must know. What is grey, furry, lives in a Gum tree, has a black leathery nose and beady eyes?” but there was still no response. “Oh, surely you know. It lives in a gum tree; eats gum leaves and has big beady eyes and furry ears.” But there was still silence.

Finally, one of the students timidly raised his hand and the teacher asked: “Ok Peter, what is the answer?” to which the child replied, “I know the answer must always be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a koala to me!” You see, the traditional and predictable answer is not always right.

In the eyes of the wider community today, the teaching of the churches is usually seen as moralistic, conservative, and predictable – in short ‘boring’. Moreover, the religious position on social policy is usually understood to be out of step with the society around it - and even out of step with its own ideals.

Hence, in opposing the teaching of ethics in primary schools the churches were perceived as not wanting to be ethical, in opposing women in church leadership they have been seen as sexist and misogynist, and in opposing same-sex marriage the churches were understood to be more in favour of ‘law’ than ‘love’ and grace. As a friend of mine once said: ‘When it comes to social policy, the churches seem to arrive to the party late, gasping for breath, and trying to make out they were there all along.’

Nevertheless, a pietistic Christian view is to understand that the role and teaching of the church in society to be ‘all about Jesus’ – which may be understood by those on the inside but is baffling to those on the outside, even if it is true. To be sure, piety when overdone causes cognitive dissonance and bad faith by not reflecting the reality of life, and often leads to unacceptable behaviour.

God and Sex

Today we encounter a moment in the church lectionary that has caused some to cling to piety rather than reality. The Song of Songs is rarely heard in the Sunday readings, and there is probably a reason for this, because the Song is an erotic poem.

Nevertheless, when I was a young fellow growing up in Sydney and involved in an Anglican youth group, I remember a sermon that was courageously sought to be an exposition on the Song of Songs. Its premise was that ‘it was all about Jesus’ and had nothing to do with erotic love. This, we were told, was the orthodox evangelical understanding of the text – no sex please, were Anglican!

It is dishonest to treat the Bible in this way and a failure in the process of interpretation, which I outlined in my last sermon. So, why is the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Scriptures?

Well, as a love poem, it reminds us that God blesses sexual love as well as the many other expressions of love we experience; such as love of family and community, and unconditional love. God’s loving is holistic, which means that the Spirit is present in all the circumstances of love. This is a correction to the wowsers mentality that would wish to contain God’s love to a narrower set of propositions and circumstances! Now, this is all good but is erotic love all we need?

Love as Action in Community

The German reformer, Martin Luther, did not like the Epistle of James because it failed to conform to his theology of salvation by God’s grace through faith alone. He called it ‘The Epistle of Straw’ and even argued that it should be removed from the canon of Scripture. His contention was that it emphasised salvation by doing good works, to wit:

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” (James 1: 22-25)

This is ‘love in community’ - a collective love that seeks the common good which is not passive but active. It argues that it is not good enough to say to people in need: ‘Remember that in all circumstances God loves you’, when you yourself are not prepared to act to address the needs of the other person. Love is not an idea or a proposition but an action that extends to the society around us.

This attitude is paralleled in the Two Great Commandments:

“... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength....and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”
(Matthew 22: 37-39)

Likewise, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, St Paul recognised that love is what God requires of us by writing:

“Love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore, love is fulfilling the law.”
(Romans 13: 10)

The Scriptures are therefore clear that love is worked out in actions that are focussed on the needs of others, which we might also call justice. As the prophet Micah wrote:

*“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”*
(Micah 6: 8)

So, while God blesses love between people, God also blesses a corporate love worked out in society. It is what we call the ‘common good’, which rises above narcissism, party spirit, sectarianism, and political self-interest. It is what we want to see in our leaders.

It is for this reason that Christians have a particular interest in welfare worked out in communal action. For example: by practicing safe health practices and being vaccinated; or by welcoming refugees who are fleeing persecution and death in Afghanistan and other places; or by treating people with respect and condemning violence and bullying in the workplace; or by showing compassion to those in need, and so on. Ultimately, it is about taking responsibility for the world in which we live.

On the other hand, love is not about having warm fuzzy feelings about others, nor is it about dragooning people into accepting our views of the world. Instead, it is a preparedness to act for their benefit and well-being of all, and it sometimes involves giving up our power and position in society and following Jesus to the cross. Beware, therefore, of those who are more concerned with the protection of their personal ideas, rights, and privileges over the welfare of the poor and marginalised.

Love and the Law

One aspect of love is the vulnerability it creates for a lover, for love is not about the exercise of power over another person. It is therefore risky to show love and compassion for others because you do not know how they might respond. Moreover, you cannot make another person love you, you can only show love and hope that they might respond.

It is the same when it is a communal matter of justice; for those who have been wronged do not always feel the need to be grateful when they receive back something that was rightfully theirs in the first place. In this respect I think of the recognition of First Nations people in our country.

The encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees in today's Gospel reading highlights the tension between the spirit and the letter of the law. Law is not necessarily about justice, but rather it is a process that hopefully leads to justice. Sadly, sometimes this is not the case.

The Pharisees used the law as a means of maintaining power over others, and in this way they could condemn those of whom they did not approve. They therefore restrained love. Those outside their system of religion were construed as sinners and therefore beyond their regard or concern. Powerful institutions, such as governments, churches, the media, and businesses continue to practice this type of behaviour. It is called self-righteousness.

Jesus described such conduct as hypocrisy. It was a matter of putting a desire for power and control above a desire for justice and the common good. To illustrate this he described the natural world as benign, but that it is the corrupt desires of the human heart that brings evil.

This emphasises the tension between a love that is life enhancing and the abuse of power which corrupts and destroys. As always, Jesus challenged those around him by exposing their motivations, and he does the same to us today.

Jesus went to the cross demonstrating a self-sacrificing love, which was more than the other loves of eros and the common good. The law condemned and crucified Jesus, but love raised him up. Jesus therefore demonstrated an integrity and strength that transcended the ways of the world, and we are called to do likewise. Ultimately, all we need is unconditional love, and it is at this point that the story becomes all about Jesus.