

Thank you

21 January 2024 *Genesis 1.26-31*
Vicar's Farewell *1 Corinthians 13.1-13*
Revd. Alan Keeler *John 15.12-17*

Knowing what to say

I imagine for most of us when we were children we would have heard a familiar hanging question from our parents.

Something had been given to us and mum or dad would have said 'and what do you say...?' You knew the phrase and maybe just out of duty you replied 'thank you'.

The same would have been true whether the person making the gift was present or not and the question would have been 'have you written your thank you cards yet?' Perhaps back then this seemed like a chore.

My birthday is in early in January and my trick was to wait until after my birthday and write the thank-yous for Christmas and birthday in one card. This halved the trouble.

As a child the notion that 'it's the thought that counts' looks like an excuse for not having chosen the present with enough care, or enough money.

I hope as life goes on we find just how much the matters of generosity and responding with gratitude are at the heart of life.

Genesis

I have chosen the readings for this service because they have been true guiding lights to me.

The book of Genesis is a work of genius. There are of course the issues of science to be related to and when Christians take Genesis in a too literal way they are missing the point. As long ago as the fourth century St. Augustine warned the readers of the Bible not to make it something which suited their own sense of tidiness. If accounts do not fit easily tighter look at what they are saying and don't try to rewrite it.

It is thought that the book of Genesis came to its present form after the nation had been in exile in the sixth century BC. This means that the writers had known their people's slavery in Egypt and conquest by the Assyrians and Babylonians. So when in our passage God is described as creating

the human race from one couple and in his image there is a huge act of courage.

This is not just some high view of human rights but that your enemies are holy too. All that you claim for yourself as a human is true of the people your fellow nationalistic countryman would hate. People from foreign lands are to be give respect. Indeed this respect must include your fellow countryman who you might also have troubles with or are in distress and require your assistance.

To have an identity of being created is to receive life as a gift. In the deepest sense we do not make our lives. The response is to be grateful. In this we do not claim rights but seek to share the gift we have received with the people around us both near and far.

You will be aware that the church in the West is in reduced circumstances. There is much talk of mission and seeking to grow in our life and influence. Sharing our faith has always been in the DNA of Christianity. I can remember as a new vicar back in 1994 wanting to seek to 'reach out', as we say.

It was not an audible voice but I was strongly impressed with the question 'are you going to love your congregation?' Now some of them could be demanding and not that respectful of me. But if you cannot love the people immediately around you what does 'reaching out mean?'

There is a quotation that comes from a variety of people that 'I love humanity, it is people I cannot stand.' When we talk of love this must not be something generally abstract. Each human encounter is where it must take place.

Faith can be inspirational but it is also practical and at times tough. It is wonderful and spiritual but also gritty and demanding. We are asked to be grateful by extending to others the love we have received from God.

1 Corinthians

I did not find my teenage years easy. I had a very loving family with caring parents and three boisterous brothers. Faith was not a big part of our lives. When I told people I was one of four boys the usual response was 'oh your poor mother.' But I had wonderful parents, plenty to share with my bothers and our home was secure and full of fun.

But the teenage years are a time of searching and we are looking for answers in new places. At the end of my teens I had a circle of friends many of whom were Christians. I had a love of science which was both very stimulating but also did not answer the human questions I had but could not easily articulate.

I began going out with one of the young women in our group who was a Christian. She gave me a book with attractive photographs and passages from the Bible. It was a gentle way to 'reach out'. One of these texts was in our reading from 1 Corinthians that we heard today. It included:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

I began to find that the Bible has a way to call out to us and these words struck me deeply. This was not the sopiness of the pop songs, the focus on romance or a euphemism for an ephemeral sexual experience. This was about people treating each other respectfully, seriously and being prepared to work faithfully at life. But also it was not pious, judgemental, life denying or even religious; whatever that means.

It was then that I made my fatal mistake. I did not understand how my contemporaries could adopt such an outdated way of life as to be a Christian. So I decide to read the copy of the New Testament that had been given to me as a school child. It had been a gift by what was then known as The Gideons. They are now called GOOD NEWS for Everyone!, Which is a bit more explanatory.

The long and the short of this was that I discovered the person of Jesus and he was not the sort person I was expecting. I have continued to learn of Jesus and the task is inexhaustible. As I did this I had many occasions where I again had that experience I spoke of earlier. The Bible called out. It was not an experience to be just given information. It was an experience of being challenged, invited, embraced.

So on the one hand my invitation to people is to read about Jesus for yourself. The other is to lay down the challenge; 'when you discover Jesus do you think of God like this?' Yes it is quite a leap to say Jesus is God and there is a lot to be said about that. But if we have the usual human expectations

about a God who is remote, judgemental or irrelevant: they will be broken and wonderfully replaced.

It is said that 'for God so love the world that he did not send a committee'. He sent this person, he sent Jesus and our response is to be grateful. Not only have we been given life but in the person of Jesus we have been shown how to be fully alive.

John's Gospel

One of the things said about Jesus was that 'he taught with authority not like the other religious teachers'. This does mean our presumptions will be broken. It may take time to see the heart of what he is offering. But it meant he was sought out by people, sometimes to trip him up but also to find the truth. On numerous occasions he is asked 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' This would mean the life of God, how to flourish, how to endure, what can you trust that will last? No doubt the prospect of heaven is part of that but it is also immediate 'please can it start now because we have trouble here.'

Jesus spoke of love. Love for God with all that we are. Love for our neighbour in the way we love ourselves. Love for enemies because they are made in God's image too.

Jesus took this one stage further with the passage we heard from John's Gospel. He said:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Now you cannot know what this means unless you have had that encounter that I spoke of earlier. So it is going to be about the person of Jesus and seeing how he shared people's lives, being wise, caring, courageous, vulnerable, forgiving; and so much more. This the disciples would have known and seen it as a very high bar to reach.

But Jesus then added:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

In this he speaks of love that is sacrificial. Jesus will be taken to the cross and die. The New Testament uses several words for love which include friendship and romantic passion. These are usually about an exchange. But there is a further on that means sacrificial love, giving without calculation. We might think of parents particularly in their children's early years. We

might think of a soldier serving their county and paying the highest cost.

This love can only be responded to with gratitude.

The key is to see who we are in God's sight. Jesus says:

to lay down one's life for one's friends

He emphasizes this by saying:

You are my friends

Jesus serves God whom he knows as a loving heavenly parent. He is not forced in his ministry or in his death. Jesus calls us to serve a true friend out of a relationship of love. We live out of gratitude for the life we have been given and the value we know God gives his people.

Jesus dies and Jesus rises again. On the one hand we are shown that God's power is greater than death but also that love is not defeated. Eternal life is the life of God now and the friendship that we find through Jesus will find a faithfulness and fulfilment as it is graciously given to us.

Gratitude

Having spoke of gratitude I am very grateful.

To each person who is present here today. And also those who have not been able to make it.

For members of St. Mary's and my pervious churches of St. James Blendon and St. Andrew's Paddock Wood.

For people I have known through the local area including Parish Primary School and representatives of the community including Councillor Keith Onslow the Deputy Mayor.

Members of my family including my Dad, and my bothers (Brian and David), daughter Laura, son-in-law Dave and grandson Arlo. Rachel was due to be here. But due to her having surgery first thing tomorrow morning and having to fly back to Berlin tonight. The high winds have made this too risky.

There is also in our hearts those we have loved and already committed to God. Our daughter Josie remains in our hearts each day and know how much her presence blessed us all.

Thanks for this service for all who have made preparations especially Alison and the Church Warden team, the decorations with flowers, candles, helping with this large congregation, for the contribution of the choir in song and Paddy for making it available through live streaming.

Many thanks for all who have prepared the lunch that will follow this service to which everyone is warmly invited to.

But I have saved the greatest gratitude for last. I spoke of a then young women who gave me a book with words from 1 Corinthians. She was Gill and we have been married for forty two years. She has been my greatest companion the heart and soul of our family and an indispensable contribution to my ministry which often only I know about.

She has been patient and kind and so much more. And I know I am not the only one to say to her 'thank you.'

From all I have said earlier you will know that the greatest praise goes to God from whom all these great gifts and treasures are given.

So to end. Just be careful what you ask for. You will be given an answer. Maybe not what you had in mind but probably something even more wonderful.