

The Vine at Home

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Hymn: 439 STF - Abba, Father, let me be yours and your alone

Opening Prayers

Parent God, we come to you with our hearts full of love. Love for our friends, for our family, for our church and for our community. We come, however, with the knowledge that we sometimes fail to open our hearts to those we find harder to love.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

We pray for our brothers and sisters in faith. We pray that they are safe and respected, whatever their faith.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

We pray for our country. For political divides and differences, and for communities ripped apart by conflict.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

We pray for marginalised communities who have been overlooked, taken for granted and received hostile, violent and prejudicial treatment.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

We pray for our church, for when it has not been a welcoming and safe space for all.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

We pray for ourselves. For when we have mistreated our mind, body or spirit and not felt worthy of love.

God, help us to love with open hearts.

Parent God, you give us two important commandments: to love you with all our heart and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

As we worship today, help us open our hearts and fill our homes and communities with love and praise. Amen.¹

Let us now say the Lord's prayer

Matthew 22:34-40 The Greatest Commandment

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest

¹ Opening prayers written by Rachel Allison

and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Reflections on the readings

There is a moment, early on in *The Lord of the Rings* movies, where the wizard Gandalf is addressing the ageing hobbit, Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo, despite all the friendship, wisdom and council that Gandalf has offered him over many years, is becoming suspicious of the wizard's motives and believes he is trying to manipulate him.

Gandalf, finally fed up with the hobbit, bursts out,

'Bilbo Baggins, do not take me as a conjuror of cheap tricks. I am not trying to rob you...I'm trying to help you!'

It is a turning moment in the conversation, and Bilbo recognises something of his stupidity in mistrusting his old friend.

Perhaps this scene is well known to you, or perhaps not – but I expect you could recall a version of it from your own life or experience. So often, we find ourselves, like Bilbo, believing the worst even in people who only have our best interests at heart. Unlike Bilbo, we don't have the excuse that our judgement is being clouded by the presence of an evil magic ring...but perhaps we can relate to him.

Gandalf loves Bilbo and is trying to give him advice that probably saves his life. Yet, even after all the respect Bilbo has for his mentor and friend, he momentarily mistakes his loving advice for a cheap trick, or even a malicious attempt to rob him. Have you ever done something like this: mistaken well-intentioned love or advice for manipulation? Or momentarily lost your trust in a friend you ought to have kept your faith in? Have others done it to you?

In many ways, it's not surprising that we behave like that. Yes, we might not be influenced by an evil magic ring, but we are affected by the way we have been treated in the past, and by the society we live in. Sadly, many of us will have been manipulated by someone who professed to love us, or fallen for a scam or con that began by appealing to our better nature. Sadly, not everyone who uses the word 'love', or even demonstrates a loving attitude towards us has our best interests at heart.

This seems to be exactly the attitude that Paul is warning against in today's reading – he is persuading the Thessalonians that his love for them and his desire to share God's love with them is not a clever trick. To put this verse into Gandalf's phrase, we might hear Paul saying: 'I'm not trying to trick you, I'm trying to love you.'

Love is at the beating heart of the Christian gospel. As we seek to follow Jesus and learn more about God's plans for our lives, we have to come to accept that we are loved, and learn how to love others. For some of us, this is difficult, as we wrestle with the imperfect models of love by which we have been affected. Perhaps we can relate to the character of Anna in another film – the modern children's classic, *Frozen*. She thinks she is falling in love with a dashing, gentle, caring prince...only to discover that he is not what he seems.

Despite all this, despite the hurt we carry, despite the broken nature of human-love, we strive to know more of God's love – this 'love divine, all loves excelling'. And we hear that clearly in Jesus' word's today. In wrestling with the question of what is the 'greatest commandment', or

the 'most important life advice', Jesus returns to two instructions, both of which centre on love.

Firstly, he echoes what his Jewish listeners would recognise from the Hebrew scriptures, this ancient instruction which Jews would have committed to memory and say regularly – 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind'.

It is this instruction to love God that helps us see beyond the way the world loves. It helps us move beyond the stories we have that compare with Anna in *Frozen* or Bilbo in *The Lord of the Rings*, where we are suspicious of love. In loving God, we come to see more of God's nature, God's love for us.

How do we express that love, or show that love? I would suggest that prayer is key. And I don't necessarily mean lots of flowery words. As Mother Teresa famously said when questioned about what she said when she prayed: 'I mostly listen'. And when the response came, what does God say to you in prayer, she replied: 'he mostly listens.' Perhaps it is this divine listening, this holy listening, this deep listening that we need to practice in order to come to know God more, to show our love for the divine.

And if we show this love for God then, as Jesus reminds us, we will come to love our neighbours as ourselves. We will discover that this big love, this divine love, wants to be shared, wants to touch other people's lives, wants to help heal the world.

It won't be easy. Love is rarely easy. When you offer love, some people will think you are manipulating them, or out to rob them, or have other, worldly intentions in mind. But that is a reason to keep loving, to keep seeking to heal the world. And, when you are feeling tired, or burnt out, come back to the first commandment, come back to listening, come back to your loving relationship with your creator. Draw strength from that – strength for the next neighbour who needs your love.

It's worth ending with an aside that regularly accompanies interpretations of this passage. When Jesus says 'neighbour', we sometimes translate it in our minds to mean the person who lives either side of me, those in my street or – at most – my local community. But Jesus' vision of neighbourliness is much bigger and broader than that. Of course we are to show love to our actual, literal neighbour – but the call doesn't end there. This is an invitation into a global neighbourhood, where we recognise all people and indeed all of creation as part of God's big village. Can we love across borders? Across the boundaries of race, wealth, class, gender, language, background, sexuality and religion? That, truly, is a love divine, all loves excelling.

To love is to get hurt, to get bruised. We will feel people's pain with them, and we will feel pain when they reject us, let us down, or seek to manipulate our love for their own ends. But we will dust ourselves off. We will nurse our wounds. And we go again.

Our world is crying out for more love, for a better kind of love. As the church of Jesus Christ, let's show them what the word means. All we need is love.²

² Reflection written by Tim Baker

Prayers of intercession

Living God, we come to you, the church of 2020 here in this place. We come to invite you to show us how to be your people today. In a world that regards the church as irrelevant or outdated, Show us how to love, guide us by your Spirit.

Living God, we hear the cry of injustice all around us: poverty, disease, the various impacts of Covid-19, homelessness, illness, pain and suffering affect so many. In a deeply unequal, unfair world, Show us how to love, guide us by your Spirit.

Living God, show us how to be a church that responds to the issues of our time. So often we can be seen as detached, aloof or out of touch with the fast-paced world around us. As we continue to show God's love in the twenty-first century, Show us how to love, guide us by your Spirit.

Living God, help us to turn to you to find our strength. Help us to see in the life, death and resurrection stories of Christ an opportunity to transform the way we live and rebuild our society founded in love. Show us how to love, guide us by your Spirit.

Living God, we have no mission but to serve you – we recognise our calling in your invitation to love one another. May we be the answers to prayers around this community and this world in the days and weeks to come. As we seek to be sharers of liberation, Show us how to love, guide us by your Spirit. Amen.³

Hymn: 407 STF – Hear the call of the kingdom

Blessing

Go out to meet a God of love. Go out and find love at work throughout God's creation. Go out and seek to build a better, safer, more sustainable world, In Jesus' name. Amen.⁴

³ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

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⁴ Additional prayers by Tim Baker