

Love One Another – Easter 5, 2016

When I was a child the one thing I wanted to be more than anything else was a zookeeper ... imagine my disappointment when at school I took an aptitude test to find out what job I was suited for – what did it come up with?

FOOTWEAR DESIGNER.

As you can see, neither of those things happened, and I ended up as a priest.

And I can tell you, that was as much a surprise to me, as to anyone else.

I thank God that I am here with you today, after a beautiful licensing service on Wednesday.

A friend of mine was speaking to the Bishop of Southwark yesterday and mentioned that he'd been at the service. "I saw the picture on Twitter" said the Bishop. "It looked more like a papal coronation than a licensing!"

Our God is a god of surprises.

I first heard of St Michael's when I came to speak to one of the Pauline Meetings, and little did I know that some years later I would end up as its Vicar.

At the time I was at another St Michael's in Chiswick. In fact, the Archangel has featured somewhat prominently in my life.

It was the name of my first school

My first church where I was curate

And now the church where I am first Vicar.

St Michael and the angels seem to have been watching over me for a long time.

It's been 9 months since Fr Paul left. A rather symbolic period of time, don't you think? During that time it's been ably carried by our Churchwardens and the Rev'd Judith Roberts, but, as the Archdeacon said on Wednesday, it is inevitably a new start.

And it is appropriate that new start should take part in Eastertide – a season of new life and growth. It is because of Christ's Risen life that we are here at all. Mary Magdalene met our Lord in a garden and thought he was the gardener. A mistake perhaps, but one that was also right in so many ways. Christ takes our cold and wintry hearts, and with the warmth of his love makes all kinds of new things grow there.

A priest might be compared to a gardener, one who nurtures new life – and it is a foolish gardener who digs us up the garden immediately on arrival without seeing what is already growing – a principle I will try to adhere to in the Vicarage garden as well as in our church life.

There will be change and I hope most of you will experience that change as positive – as someone with fresh eyes and new ideas, but I will need your help also in understanding this place. My job, in the first instance, is very much to listen – so forgive me if I ask lots of irritating questions.

And the major way I shall do that is by visiting you all.

Over the next three months, I intend to visit every single member on the electoral roll, so do expect me to call – that's meant to sound like a nice thing rather than a threat!

That's your opportunity to tell me who you are,

What matters to you

How you became a Christian

Why you come to this Church

And where you see it going in the future.

It's also a chance for you to feed me inordinate amounts of tea and biscuits – we were taught at theological college that we would have to sacrifice our waistlines for the love of God.

And this directly relates to our Annual Parochial Church Meeting today.

This meeting is an opportunity to celebrate all that is good in the life of this church and what God is doing among us by His grace.

On this day, I would like you to think of one thing for which you are grateful for at St Michael's, and hold it in your heart in prayer during this Mass, offering it to God in praise.

It might be the Baptism of your grandchild.

Beautiful music in worship.

The support of a kind friend at church.

A prayer that has been answered.

And we do all this in the context of today's Gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples 'love one another – 'By this, everyone will know you are my disciples'.

Christians talk a lot about love – but God knows it's hard to do!

Jesus makes this statement in John's Gospel, at the Last Supper, at the very moment that Judas leaves the room to betray him.

But Jesus has just washed their feet.

His love continues through betrayal, self-interest, sin, error and pain.

In English we have only one word for love. We use the same word to say:

I love Baked Beans

I love the Archers

I love you.

But in Greek there are 3 words –

Philos – the love of the mind, the abstract idea of love

Agape – the love of the heart, that we have for family and friends

Eros – the love of the body, sensual and physical.

Which words does Jesus use here? AGAPE.

The love of family and friends is the love that Jesus wants us to have for each other. Family and friends often disagree, argue and bicker, but if they can remember the original love that binds them together then it does not tear them apart. As Saint Peter described in our reading from Acts- the Holy Spirit came upon gentiles as well as Jews – there is no ‘them and us’ in the Christian community – there is only ‘we’.

We think that love comes naturally to us – it doesn’t. It is something we must learn to do our whole lives long.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wondered why Saint Paul thought love was greater than faith and hope.

He came to the conclusion it was because

in heaven we won’t need faith – we will know what is currently unknown.

In heaven we won’t need hope, because we will see what we have sought only love will remain.

So to love in this life is to prepare for eternity.

So as I come to you today, Jesus’ words ring out to me, reminding all of us what our vocation is as a Christian community.

And my role in that?

To be a priest is not always to be nice or even to be liked by everyone, but to try and show the way of love and do what that love demands, no matter how unpopular or controversial that might be.

And for me that is powerfully expressed in a film called ‘Dead Man Walking’ which some of you might know.

In that film, Susan Sarandon plays a nun called Sister Prejean who meets a murderer on death row played by Sean Penn. He's a truly nasty piece of work, the dregs of humanity without moral principle or feeling for his victims. But instead of abandoning him she counsels him, and over time she brings him to a point of understanding and repentance – but there is one thing that he cannot bear. At his execution the families of those he has murdered will be watching and he will have to look into their eyes. She says to him that at that moment, as the needle goes in and the poison takes effect, he must look at her, her alone, and she says, 'I will be the face of love for you'.

Looking at her,
he looks not on her,
but on the face of Christ
who loves us despite everything.

Christ sends us to love one another.
To be faces of love each other and to the world.
By this we will be known as His disciples.

Fr Stephen Stavrou – 24th April 2016