

One day at a time

Have you ever felt in yourself or perhaps you've heard it said that there really is a disconnect between one's Sunday worship for an hour or so and the rest of one's life? At its grossest is the person who says that he loves God but hates his brother and of course that can come in all shades and permutations – and undoubtedly those who hate their brother have a good reason (of course!) but both the people of the Old Testament and the first believers in the Early Church were cognisant that faith and life – belief and behaviour were connected. James said that faith without works is dead meaning it is easy to talk the faith and sound good but not really believe. Paul spoke about struggling with sin and seeking to live in the grace of one's baptism in our relationships all the while fighting the idea that we're working our way to heaven – for we are saved by God's grace through faith – yet God has prepared good works for us to do. John says bluntly that if you say you love God but you hate your brother then you're a liar about loving God! Faith and life; belief and behaviour are inseparably linked. Actually that's true of life not just Christianity!

So here's an irony that Christmas with all its cultural build up of family, love, food, and festivities can be a horrible time of fighting, revisiting old battles, bitterness, loneliness that resolves in the perennial 'never again' – until next time is just around the corner when people do it all over again! Christmas can be the ultimate family juggling exercise where people navigate houses and encounters to make sure the wrong family members don't meet or don't meet for long! With Christians celebrating Christmas now for well over 1500 years you'd hope that it would be peace and good will to all people – except some of the family! Thinking cynically perhaps this is partly why the Roman Catholic Church instituted the Festival of the Holy Family (which happens to fall on today in many calendars) to help people be nice to each other as they contemplated Mary, Joseph, and Jesus!

It is simply sad that what I'm saying isn't the odd occasional event but part of too many people's lives. If we all didn't have the social pressure to participate in Christmas – of course helped by such things as public holidays – how many would be happy to forgo the whole thing? How many do forgo it and are happy to go to work (the double time pay is a better outcome for the day!)?

It is ironic that what has been labelled a 'traditional family' time can be a key moment to reveal the dark side of families! Such is the way of our world because things are not perfect; we're not perfect; and life it seems doesn't 'play fair'. The joy of the birth of a baby strikes a dagger into the heart of those who have lost children or can't have them. Drive past a wedding scene and people can mutter 'fools' or 'don't do it!' if marriage hasn't been good for them. (The various living arrangements these days are often themselves testimonies to the elusiveness of finding happiness long term together, I think.) We know the volatility of emotions and tempers and how irrevocably damaging the quick response can be whether reaching for words that are meant to hurt, fists that are meant to control, or bullets that just lash out. We hope families grow love and security and the people therein are loving and secure but inevitably we encounter people for whom families were often – hopefully not totally – selfish and critical and the people therein learn to trust no one but themselves.

There is a rather naïve view around that churches are all about families which doesn't take into account that some of Jesus' toughest words about discipleship and conflict were spoken against families because (a) they can be places of harm and (b) they can claim a priority over God himself which Jesus challenged. Families are gifts to us from God just as a husband and a wife are gifts by

God and thus children are also gifts from God. Churches are all about Jesus and discipleship and pointing out that families can be both a joyful and tough place to live out that discipleship.

I don't think it was accidental that our second reading today – so close after Christmas – gets us to look at our behaviour. Behaviour based on our relationship with Jesus. The logic is simple: if Jesus is Lord – if he is your Lord – if he has established a relationship with you – if you say you're following him – then here are ways for you to live. How we live is always up to us! We determine our behaviours and the reasons for them and it is ok to be law abiding and wanting to be nice at home and so often but our orientation, our focus, as Christians on Friday was peering into a manger and on Sundays it is going back to a cross and from there to the altar and bread wine and when we leave this space and hour, our focus is on water as we recall our baptism and our ears listen for his Word as we read and pray and take what we receive and pour them into our lives and situations.

What God tells us through his Word isn't mysterious or hard to decipher or fathom – often the problem we have with God's Word is not understanding – oh, we understand it alright – but it is to do with us, our will, our wants, our selfishness, our disobedience, our excuses and blames for which we can find evidence because the people around us are sinners but they don't control our behaviour, we do. That's why Paul could write:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17 ESV)

And so we do look to Jesus because deep down what we crave, I think, is love – we want the people around us to love us – and it's messy at times as is the way of people – and we want more than just words from a book and bread and wine or a recollection of water. We want more. And so in our selfishness and sin we can look for love in all the wrong places and ignore what God gives to us – and ignore him. Because this is the mystery and paradox of the manger and the cross, of words, water, bread and wine – that by staying close to these means, by staying close to Jesus here, we are strengthened and loved and we grow in the relationship God gives to us and become grounded in God's grace. This doesn't necessarily produce 'happy ever after' miracles – life can remain tough because of the sin around us or our sinful struggles within – but there can be changes in people and situations and ourselves for God doesn't ignore his people but is present and does help us. Our faithfulness to God is not based on God giving us what we want – and that can be tough to learn or remember – but when things break from Christmas presents onwards – when we are betrayed – when we muck up – God will never throw his hands up in horror and stomp away from us but he will come to us again and again and love us and bind us up and help us ... one day at a time.