

GOD'S MANIFESTO

John 15: 1-8 and Micah 6:1-8

There's a well-known principle that people tend either towards simplicity or complexity, but rarely hold the middle ground. They (no, we) do this partly by habit, and partly as a tactic, but perhaps most of all we do it because of laziness: it can be fiendishly difficult to find, articulate and enact that which is simple and yet profound. We see this principle operating in technicolour detail with our politicians when they answer questions: they either want to get a simplistic message across (e.g. "a Labour-SNP alliance would be the worst nightmare") or they try to obfuscate to avoid answering the question (e.g. "full fiscal autonomy will be introduced gradually in conjunction with a tapering of the Barnett formula over timeframes yet to be determined while maintaining the principle of double ..."). Rarely, but memorably, they hit the middle ground: e.g. when Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address spoke of "government of the people, by the people, for the people" the idea was simple and profound.

In this election week, I want to return to the subject of politics later in this sermon, but let us start by applying this same principle to the Christian faith. Some of us are wont to simplicity, both in how our faith is stated (e.g. "I believe that Jesus died for our sins") and in what God requires from us: (e.g. "Repent and be saved"). Others have a tendency for complexity, giving the impression that it is impossible fully to understand God without a grasp of Ancient Greek and Hebrew, and certainly not without a theological degree, preferably a doctorate. At various times in its history the Church has lurched from the one extreme to another: personal experience of Jesus (simplistic) progressed to the political establishment of the Church with its many Councils that resulted in a multitude of creeds and catechisms (complex); in time these gave way to an emphasis on scripture alone (simplistic) but this principle evolved through ever more rarified approaches to scriptural exegesis (complex) before finally creating a backlash to charismatic faith based once again on personal experience of the Holy Spirit (simplistic). The pendulum has swung wildly and frequently during Christian history, never yet resting on the simple yet profound. The pattern continues within and between churches: Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic, Baptist, Unitarian, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Moravian, etc etc. Why can't we all just simply be Christian???

What would it mean to be simply and profoundly Christian? Our scripture passages today give us some clues. Let's start with John's gospel.

This week's lectionary reading is the first half of a familiar discourse, the second half of which we will read next week. The image of the vine is most commonly used in the Hebrew Bible in the context of the judgment: for example, in Isaiah 5 the prophet talks of the vineyard as a beloved place but decries the vines for yielding wild grapes. But John is picking up on another tradition that we find in the book of Ecclesiasticus, one of the inter-testamental writings that appears in some of our bibles as the Apocrypha. Listen to these verses from that book:

Like a vine I caused loveliness to bud and my blossoms became glorious and abundant fruit. Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my produce. (Eccl. 24: 17,19)

These verses are spoken by Wisdom, the personification of the intelligent purpose of God that lies behind creation, the archetype upon which John developed his concept of the Word. In the Apocrypha, as in parts of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament we are urged to come to Wisdom, follow Wisdom, dwell in Wisdom and in doing so we are coming to, following and

dwelling in God. Similarly for John, we are called to follow, to dwell in and become one with Jesus because in that way we become one with God.

For John then this analogy of the vine applies to Jesus, because Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom, the Word made flesh and come among us. But John takes the analogy further: on the one hand he says that alongside Jesus as the core of the vine we are the branches; on the other hand he says that God is the gardener, the one who endlessly coaxes the vine to fruitfulness, pruning where required, watering as necessary. And so we have the secret of spiritual success, a secret both simple and profound: if you dwell in me you will bear much fruit; if you do not dwell in me you will wither and die, be thrown on the fire and burnt. All that is needed, says Jesus, is to dwell in him.

Needless to say, we have often overlooked this profound simplicity. We have erred on the side of mere simpleness because we have translated the requirement into a matter of belief, sometimes even to the point of having only to sign up to some doctrinal statements that guarantee our salvation. And we have erred on the side of complexity, in that we have established a long list of rules and regulations that must be followed to be part of a church – rules often about such extraneous matters as sex, alcohol, dress codes, and trivialities such as the format of our services, the ways in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper, and the gender, age or marital status of our ministers. Yet what Jesus is telling us in these verses has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with any of these things. Dwell in me, we are told, (and this is picked up much more fully in next week's reading) is all about heeding his commandments. And what are those commandments? John tells us "Love one another"; elsewhere we are told it is "Love God" and "Love your neighbour"; and finally, to enable all of the above, we are also told to "love self".

Whereas a typical church pronouncement will focus on sins to be repented of and rules to be followed in the Kingdom of God, when we read carefully through the gospels we don't find Jesus simply and categorically naming any sins, and we don't find him chronicling the do's and don'ts of church membership. Yes, he told parables, some of which held stinging rebukes, e.g. for people who hoard money. Yes, his rhetoric was sometimes scathing particularly on those whose religiosity was for show, and when he saw exploitation by the rich and the powerful. But his overwhelming message was about love. His words and his deeds demonstrated the inclusiveness of the Love of God: no-one, male or female, Jew or Gentile, maimed, diseased or discredited was outside the love of God. And his challenge, to individual followers, to religious leaders and to the political elite was the same: "Love one another". Simple and yet profound.

Ten days ago I was at a Christian Aid event in the Question Time format that seems to have become very popular in these election times. After discussing so many major and intractable world issues – migrants flooding across the Mediterranean; ISIS decimating the Middle East and North Africa; a cyclone flattening Vanuatu (and if it had been this week we could add the earthquake in Nepal); 2/5 of the world's population living in extreme poverty while banks, international companies, and the richest individuals evade taxes at unprecedented levels – after all of that, the panelists were asked to conclude by saying what one thing they thought we could most do to help. The last word fell to the Public Policy Director, and she simply quoted Micah 6:8:

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Here we are again: simple yet deeply profound; memorable, self-evidently true, but paradoxically requiring great commitment and dedication if these principles are to be embedded in our daily living. Doing justice isn't easy – firstly to work out what is the just thing and secondly to have the courage to implement it. Loving kindness ditto. And walking humbly with our God is to recognise, as the speaker does in Micah, that no matter how much we achieve it will only ever be a drop in the ocean of all that is required, and will only ever scratch the surface in terms of gratitude for God's grace to us.

Bringing our two passages together, conflating their simple yet profound words of wisdom, we can see exactly what is required of us as Christian people. It is love. Love of self, love of one another, love of neighbour, love of justice, love of kindness and love of God. Love is God's Manifesto promise and so it should be ours; but this is not a mere party political slogan, a point-scoring opportunity in some spiritual debate, it is not something to be preached on the doorstep far less something to be worn as a rosette. Love is an active verb. It is a never ending challenge to do, as the politicians like to say, "the right thing" - not by us or for our interest, but for one another. Or, in the words of the theologian Marcus Borg who died earlier this year, Jesus calls us not to believing (a cerebral act with little or no consequence), but to believing (an act of commitment of the whole person, body, mind and spirit).

And so we are back to politics. When I was growing up we went to church religiously every Sunday, dressed in our Sunday best and refrained from the many practices that were considered heathen on the Sabbath (be it playing games outside or watching TV indoors). We went to church every week with but one exception. That was the Sunday before an election, because on one occasion the minister had dared to say from the pulpit which party the church members should support and it was not the party my parents supported. Best then that we kept well away.

So I know the dangers of preaching on a political theme, particularly at election time. I'm not going to tell you how to vote. But I would invite you to bring our simple but profound gospel teaching to bear on the issue of this election campaign. If love indiscriminate is our commandment, what are we going to do about immigration, about welfare payments, about protecting the foreign aid budget, about austerity measures, about tax credits and tax levels, about greenhouse gas emissions, about the constitutional structure of the UK? Each one of these issues is complicated, and there are others besides, but our reflection upon them and upon how we vote in this election must begin from our commitment as Christians to love as an active verb.

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