

## TRINITY 14

One of the well-known films I've never seen is *Love Story*, from 1970. It coined one of the more irritating taglines of the 70's, 'Love means never needing to say you're sorry', endlessly reproduced on gift-shop ephemera. As I haven't seen this flick I can't comment on whether the context improves the sentiment, but it is the opposite of Christianity. I wonder now whether it also reflected a zeitgeist moment, expressing the triumph of self-justifying relativism and the rejection of imposed authority, moral or otherwise. If so, that moment coincided with the beginning of the end of sacramental confession: guilt was out, and self-expression the new aspiration.

Forgiveness, generosity and refusing judgementalism are our themes this morning: Joseph refusing to bear a grudge against his brothers; Paul reminding us that our strongly-held opinions are never to over-ride our love for those with whom we disagree; Jesus teaching us that prodigal forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel. We need to understand how these themes play in 2020.

Our tradition is clear. Today's gospel parable illustrates our often-repeated petition in the Lord's Prayer: 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. And Jesus sharpens the teaching by reversing the terms: 'as we forgive, we shall be forgiven'. Acknowledging God's love means that we *do* need to say we are sorry, to him and each other. And when we in turn choose forgiveness over revenge and love over hate we begin to glimpse or even inhabit God's creative goodness coming to perfection in us, because forgiveness is participation in who God is.

In the past week I came across two articles in the secular press which look beyond that *Love Story* motto, not least as a result of opportunities for reflection provided by lockdown. Our challenge as the Church is how we reconnect with such innately human (and, we believe, God-given) instincts among those with whom we've lost touch, in order to recall people to the source of their being.

One, from a 26 year-old female journalist who has been in therapy five times, concludes:

I've started to accept that however well I know myself, I may not be particularly adept at altering my behaviour. I've begun to practise the ways I could be better. I've tried to be more vulnerable rather than simply stating what my vulnerabilities are. I've tried to be less intense and self-brutalising, and have also accepted that even my best intentions might not be enough. ...

It's easy to get too close to our self-image when we have a lot of time on our hands. But it's also easy to convince ourselves that our hands are tied when they aren't. ... we must accept that the ability to spot our own bad habits is merely sport when we do nothing to fix them.

The master in our parable says to the unforgiving slave: 'should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave as I had mercy on you?' Jesus teaches that knowledge of our own sinfulness leads us to exercise compassion on those we meet. 'Love your neighbour as yourself', the second commandment in Jesus' taxonomy, requires proper self-examination. And love of neighbour follows from and expresses love of God. We have something to talk about with anyone who wants to change and accepts self-examination. But the mechanics of the confessional are not the beginning of that conversation.

The other piece was written by a 31-year-old man who was dying of cancer. He wrote an article in April about not expecting to see the end of lockdown; now, told that he had only weeks left, he suggested five actions to the rest of us (*reduced to core statements*).

First, *the importance of gratitude*.

Second, *a life, if lived well, is long enough*. This can mean different things to different people.

Third, it's important to let yourself *be vulnerable and connect to others*. We live in a society that prizes capability and independence, two things that cancer often slowly strips away from you.

Fourth, *do something for others*.

Fifth, *protect the planet*

His final conclusion was:

After the gut-punch of cancer diagnosis, I've really struggled to define a purpose for my own life.

I found in time this came naturally. Life is for enjoyment. Make of it what you can.

The writer died on the day this second article was published.

Uninformed by faith and in no way original, this final testament is still part of a conversation we need to join. It hangs on what you mean by *enjoyment*, on what is and brings true joy. Compare his last two sentences with John 10.10

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

That is almost the same, but with Christ as the light and guide to making of life what we can. Enjoyment of God for ever was said to be the aim of our creation in the old catechisms: perhaps we don't sufficiently often wonder about what that means.

Together with the previous writer's newly-focussed understanding of self-examination and self-correction, here is sufficient common ground for a conversation about, and growth towards, Christian faith. We badly need to welcome this common ground if we are to bring people home to God.

In a recent book, *Strange Rites*, about new religious phenomena in our supposedly secular age, Tara Isabella Burton explores a paradox: 72 per cent of Americans who claim they have no religion also say that they 'believe in something; almost half regularly talk to a higher power and a similar number trust a spiritual force to protect them in life'. Burton discusses at length the explosion of eclectic spirituality which has paralleled the decline of institutional churches in the West. It is not necessarily inimical to the Gospel, but does not, by definition, lead to joining worshipping communities; it is also often internet-based, a different type of community.

There are differences in how this is expressed in the UK, but the longing for meaning and purpose remains stubbornly universal. As the coronavirus crisis drags on and people around the world are forced to confront their mortality, many are turning to religion, but with no guidance. Bible sales and Google searches for 'prayer' are on the rise. As we've learned, while physical gatherings are suspended or limited, services are streaming online. The line between traditional religions and "religions of the internet" is blurrier than ever and we have discovered a new connectedness in that; everything we do here is reaching more people than it has for decades. We must rejoice in that and do more to offer the Gospel of generous forgiveness and enjoyment of life lived to the full that Jesus proclaims.