

## Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September Real relationships

Ezekiel 33:7-11  
Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

Last Saturday, Paul and I went to Birmingham Rep to see a play called “Noises Off”. Some of you will know the plot, but for those who are not familiar with it, it’s a good old British farce, complete with misunderstandings, multiple doors, dropped trousers, unrequited passion – and (inexplicably) several plates of sardines.....

Until about halfway through Act 1, when it becomes apparent that what we are seeing is a rehearsal for a farce with all those components – that the seriously dysfunctional community gathered in the house with many doors is in fact being played by a group of actors – who we rapidly come to realise, are a pretty dysfunctional community in themselves. In Act 2 we see behind the scenes as the actors fall in love with each other, fall out with each other, and fall over each other – and by Act 3.....

Well by Act 3 it had all become so – farcical – that it’s hard to describe what was happening!

A community, being played by another community.... and as I was writing this, I realised that actually there’s another layer of community beyond that - made up of the real actors playing the actors playing the characters in the drama.

Communities – groups of people gathered together around a particular common feature. Location. Interests. Family. Faith. From the beginning of time, human beings have gathered in communities. And we will all be part of several. At the theatre we bumped into someone from our church community here. And amazingly – I found that I was sitting next to someone I had worked very closely with in the NHS. Lots of catching up in the interval!

Communities are built on relationships. And yet, as the drama showed, relationships are hard. We get them wrong all the time. We’ve seen that in this morning’s readings - from the community of the OT People of God, and their

failing relationship with their God, to the dysfunctional personal relationships highlighted by Matthew in the Gospel – relationships are hard.

And it's not just these stories. Preceding them in the Bible are apparently endless pages of wars and fallings out. Individuals and nations quarrelling with each other, within themselves, making and then breaking promises to God. Where does it all end?

Or rather, where does it all begin?

Let me take you back to the story of the first human relationships – between Adam, and Eve, and God in the Garden of Eden story. All is good – the relationships are perfect. Until the snake pops its enticing head up, the humans choose to go their own way, rather than God's, and all hell breaks loose. Their relationship with God is broken. Their relationships with each other are broken – Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake. Their relationship with creation is broken as they have to leave Eden, and enter into the world we know, with all its 'thorns and thistles' as Genesis 3 so eloquently describes it. The bad choice has much to answer for.

So far, so gloomy. But please don't switch off – either figuratively in the building or literally if you're watching on line.

Because the compilers of the lectionary have not only given us this picture of gloom, but have also offered us the remedy for this human propensity to mess things up.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another” writes St Paul in the letter to the Romans. “The Ten Commandments, all the laws that God gave to the people of Israel, all the ‘thou shalt nots’ murdering, stealing, and all that – what Jesus has shown us is that they all boil down to just one thing – love one another.”

Simples. We just have to love one another, our relationships will be restored, and all will be well.

Excellent. That's sorted then. We can move on, and maybe even get home early this morning.....

But meanwhile, out in the real world.....

So let's just pause and have a think about what the Bible means when it uses this particular word 'love'. Because the English word 'love' covers lots of different meanings

It can mean romantic love - and sexual desire.

It can mean 'really like a lot' – "I love eating cake".

It can mean the feeling we have for our closest family and friends

And yet what is meant by love here is something different again.

And if you're interested, the Bible has a particular word for this type of love. In the NT it's known as *agape*, and it reflects the unconditional, self-giving love of God.

[The Bible Project](#) – an online resource - puts it like this...

"Rather than a 'feeling' that happens to you, *agape* love is an **action**. The choice you make to seek the well-being of people other than yourself....

"And doing it without expecting anything in return....

"And doing it especially for those who *can't* return it...."

You might say that *agape* love is the choice which acts as the antidote to the disastrous choice made by Eve and Adam in the Garden.

It is certainly the love which Jesus showed throughout his life and ministry – choosing to seeking out the poorest, the lost, the outcasts.

It's the love – the choice - that Jesus displayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, as the soldiers were on their way to arrest him. The love which took him to the cross - to die - so our relationship with God could be restored. The relationship which human beings were – and are – helpless to restore in and of ourselves.

Jesus' self-giving, *agape* love has done it for us.

So, if St Paul is following Jesus in telling us that we should love one another in this way – what might that look like? Especially given that Jesus' own teaching on it<sup>1</sup> can be summarised in this pithy phrase

"the ultimate standard of authentic *agape* love is how we treat the person we can't stand."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>2</sup> Also from [The Bible Project](#)

First up – to me it feels like a weight off my shoulders, because it’s not asking me to manufacture warm and rosy feelings towards someone that – to be honest – I don’t have warm and rosy feelings for.

On the other hand – it is massively and hugely challenging. “Seeking the well-being of others without expecting anything in return.”  
“How we treat the person we can’t stand”

And I can’t stand here and offer a simple 1-2-3 steps to doing it. Firstly because I am as much of a learner in this as anyone else. More so probably.  
And secondly because I don’t think there is a simple way

The passages we read give us some pointers

From Matthew

- Listen carefully to other viewpoints
- Use others to help where that’s possible
- Persevere, for everyone gets hurt when relationships break down

From Ezekiel

- Pay attention to God’s way.
- Identify the things that go wrong and turn away from them. Repent. Say sorry. Learn from our mistakes.

From Romans

- Wake up! To the things in our society, our culture, which pull us away from living the way God wants us to live. The voices that say the poor are scroungers, that those seeking sanctuary in our country have no right to do so. Those who insist that the earth’s resources are there for us to exploit.
- Wake up! To the conscious or unconscious biases which mean that we treat some people in different ways from others – even though we are all God’s children.
- Wake up! To how easy it is to say something unpleasant. To hold a grudge. To not even begin to try to forgive someone who has hurt us. To fight back. Remember, as Dr. Martin Luther King preached: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

And instead, to “put on the Lord Jesus”. In other words, as far as we can, to live, like Jesus, a life of self-giving love, seeking the well-being of others – and doing it without seeking anything in return.

It’s an enormous challenge. One that I suspect we will spend a lifetime working through. Sometimes, with God’s help, we will find it possible. And the more we practise, the more often that will happen. The more often we will be able to show Jesus’ *agape* love in our relationships and communities.

When we came out of the theatre after the play, Paul and I sat in Centenary Square for a while, whilst a swirl of young children played in the water park. Some could barely toddle, others were getting quite ‘grown up’. Some had special water-suits, others were just in their ordinary clothes. Their families clearly came from many, many different ethnic backgrounds. Thirty or forty little individuals in a community of watery fun. And in the 10-15 minutes we were there, there were no arguments, quarrels, sulks or disagreements. All were playing in perfect harmony. What a wonderful picture.

What a vision of community to aspire to.