

Hug a hoodie

4 9 11

O God, you declare your mighty power
most chiefly in showing mercy and pity:
mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace
that we, running the way of your commandments,
may receive your gracious promises,
grant to us, who have not seen, that also we may believe
and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure.

My text today is from the Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 13 and verse 8, 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.'

It's good to be back. 'Good to be back ?' . . . but you haven't been away you could say. True but each Sunday in August, we have had a different visiting preacher – Simon Barnes, John Gay, Philip Burges, Roger Gilbert – so this is the first time I've actually stood in my own pulpit since the end of July ! And it is good to be back.

My text from Romans sounds awfully like the practical advice which Polonius gave to his son, Laertes, just before the young-man was about to leave Denmark to study in France – 'Neither a lender nor a borrower be.' (Hamlet I iv) Whatever you may think of Polonius, his advice to his son is sensible, urging Laertes to avoid

debt by not being silly enough to borrow or to lend money. 'Owe no one anything' writes St Paul which also sounds like good financial sense. Indebtedness is a major burden of our contemporary society where we all have credit cards and it is easier to borrow money than it is to earn it or to pay it back. Now the financial crash fuelled by the selling on of sub-prime mortgages and individual countries living beyond their means have resulted in inevitable austerity measures. The Cameron-Clegg Coalition Government is set on implementing a raft of such measures to reduce the UK national debt and the resulting pain will have consequences for us all.

But St Paul is not being a financial consultant in offering his advice to 'owe no one anything'. Instead Paul is advising us how best to live the Christian life. And because Paul, like Bartholomew, were both Jews rooted in the Torah, bent on understanding the Law, the God-given principles by which to live our lives, Paul is advising us how best to live the righteous life by a regime of spiritual prudence.

The idea of not being in debt to anyone may seem unrealistic if on reflection you come to the conclusion that we owe so much to our parents, our families and our friends that we can never repay or return what we have received from them. Perhaps we are not meant to but instead are meant to pass on what we have received to others who have a present need ?

But here in Romans 13 and verse 8, the word 'owe', in Greek οφειλω (opheilo)' has another meaning which Paul uses in citing the exception to the rule : owe no one anything except to love one another. What we have is not a debt but an

obligation. We are obliged, it is our duty, to love one another. You'll remember that Jesus summarised the whole of the commandments in two simple principles to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. And it is to the second of these principles that Paul is pointing us – 'to love one another'.

I know it is easy to point the finger at what is wrong in our society but I feel and I fear that our contemporary malaise is rooted in our general lack of love one for the other. We don't love each other because we don't respect each other. We don't value other people because they are fellow human beings made in the image of God. Instead, we judge people by appearance: their looks, their youth, their money, possessions and status but we don't rate people simply because they are people like us. If our current method of accounting which values a company's assets were also to take account of the value to that company of the people it employed, then how very different a company's balance sheet of its assets would read if its people were given their due worth, not just a company's material possessions.

Of course, there is nothing new under heaven. What Paul said then is equally applicable now. As ever, our clear obligation is to love our neighbour. To respect and to value those with whom we come in contact is our duty as Christians. If we are to transform this life by living the Christian life, then our debt to God will be repaid in part by doing what he wants us to do and that is to accept that people have real worth and value because they are people and as such our neighbours who are worthy of our love and respect.

David Cameron has just spoken about the need for tough love: to be firm with the those responsible for the disorder in our cities, echoing perhaps the underlying spirit of that well-known verse in the Bok of Proverbs which advises us against sparing the rod and thereby spoiling the child Perhaps he was more on the right lines when he was alleged to have said we should all hug a hoodie !

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

4th September, 2011

H: Sermon 24: Hug a hoodie

