

## Love, costing not less than everything

It was telling that yesterday when the President of the United States Barack Obama met hundreds of young people in a “town hall” here in London that in the course of an hour and a half not one of them mentioned Europe. In a meeting where they were allowed to ask him any question they liked – they asked about fundamental human and global issues – climate change, LGBTi issues, especially equal marriage - and a lot of time was spent discussing the nature of racism, tolerance of difference, prejudice.

Both Barack and Michelle Obama are known for speaking to gatherings of young people – Michelle Obama has a special relationship of her own with London's girls, speaking to Elizabeth Garratt Anderson School in Islington and Mulberry School for girls in Tower Hamlets.

Yesterday, the President advised the teenagers in front of him; “Progress is not inevitable and it requires struggle, perseverance and discipline, and faith”.

His advice, given on the day when just over the channel in Paris, 170 countries lined up to sign the Climate Change agreement, was to be uncynical, get involved, don't “pull back”.

This from a President whose administrations have faced unprecedented political stalemate and who in an exasperated moment during the long process to reform healthcare said “I am president of the United States and I can't get anything done”. This in contrast to one of his predecessors, the first President Bush who in 1990 declared “I am President of the United States and I am not going to eat any more broccoli”.

That President Obama can urge young people to be passionate about shaping the world, and in his other piece of advice, to “seek out those you disagree with” in order to learn the art of compromise and change, was to my ears remarkable and refreshing and providing a welcome challenge to what in this country is very often a rather cynical and shrill political culture.

This Thursday, a group of 60 people from this church have said they will go to an assembly of London Citizens – a meeting being held at the Olympic Park in Stratford, with the two main candidates who are standing for London Mayor: Zac Goldsmith and Sadiq Khan. London Citizens, of which St James's is a part, is broad based community organising, a way of doing politics that originated in Chicago – and one of whose most famous proponents was one Barack Obama. The assemblies are impressive occasions, and the 60 people going from this church are not part of a crowd or an audience – but an assembly; a group of individuals who take part, who exercise their democratic power in drawing up their own manifestos and putting them to candidates standing for offices. They will then act as witnesses to the politicians' pledges and promises and in a series of assemblies hold them to account. A key aspect of Citizens assemblies is that there is no heckling allowed or booing. Silence is used as a powerful reaction if a previous pledge has not been met; and politicians find that reaction of silence in a large crowd unusually challenging. You might say that these assemblies, in holding elected politicians to account, are using “tension in the service of love”, in the service of a better world. Another key aspect is that if pledges are met, and situations do change – such as the ending of child detention in immigration centres, which was championed by Nick Clegg under the Coalition government, a previous manifesto demand of Citizens, politicians are thanked publicly: and given small gifts, usually flowers. This they find equally surprising and sometimes a bit unnerving.

On Wednesday of this week, we are hosting another debate with our partners *JustShare* on the future of trades unions. In a couple of weeks' time we are hosting a debate with our partners *Theos* on the future of Conservative politics in the UK. Whatever your own political background or preference, these topics have practical impact on how we live our lives and the shape of our society. Please come and learn, and think and debate with us.

Today is a day to pause and think about who we are as a church – our annual parochial church meeting is after this service. And just like the Citizens meeting on Thursday, we are not a crowd or an audience or a self-interest group or a self-centred gathering. We are “church” – from a Greek word *ekklesia* - which simply means – assembly. And our language, our meaning, our orientation, our ethos, our future and our calling – is laid out in the gospel today.

Jesus speaks in the last hours of his time with his friends – he gives them a last message – before he faces the frightened politicians and fickle crowds that will have him killed. And he chooses at that pivotal moment not to make a big speech, or to gee them up to carry things on when he’s gone, to give them a blueprint or a plan or a manifesto. Instead, he creates a memory – he kneels down and washes their feet and then says very simply – Love one another. By this will everyone know that you are my disciples – if you love one another.

And this love is so often misunderstood as something soft, something to do with how we feel. We have been befuddled by a thousand romantic films and because I couldn’t get away this weekend without some Shakespearean reference, we have it in mind that love is like that of Ferdinand of Miranda in the *Tempest*;

Hear my soul speak:  
The very instant that I saw you, did  
My heart fly to your service.  
(*The Tempest*, 3.1)

Lucky old you if you know or have known that kind of love. Let’s not be rude about it; it’s fabulous. But the love that we are hearing about today is not eros – romantic love – but **agape** – love that acts for the common good.

And that can sound to some ears a bit worthy – a bit pedestrian – and anyway unrealistic in a violent world.

But in John’s gospel, the life and love we are offered are anything but pedestrian or worthy or unrealistic: we’re offered a picture of human life that is beautiful, open hearted, sometimes broken hearted and full of love. Jesus’s words about love are not fairy tales or fantasies; this love is shot through with tears, with glory, with a fundamental promise to serve – that is resolutely uncynical, tender, willing to take risks,

love that is adventurous, and never willing to give up hope.

This love is willing to stand on the boundaries of life, and asks those who love in this way to live on the border between who we are and who we can become, on the boundary between now and not yet, in the hinterland between daily life as we know it and eternal life as we intimate it.

This love is the DNA of Christianity; and is an invitation to live ferociously and generously in the service of love itself; an invitation to live gracefully and wisely – even while we know that we live in an unmended world and an unmended life – even while we live with the knowledge of brutal cruelty, profligate waste, fearful violence. And how is that we know about all this violence? Because we realise every day our own capacity for selfishness and self-serving motivation.

It is in this bracingly real life context, not a fantasy life, that this love is real.

*Love one another as I have loved you.* Jesus’s words, like his actions, are transformative: he doesn’t even say “love one another as you love yourself” (although, yes, he said that before) – and he doesn’t say “love one another as you would have others love you” (although, yes, he said something like that before). He says “love one another as I have loved you”, just as he kneels and chooses to wash the feet of his friends. This love is an expression not of weakness but of strength; a love that is characterised by redeemed humility.

This love is not a quietist giving in to bullies, not a passive acquiescence to threat or injustice or violence. This love is not a reductive binary relationship in which neuralgic need drives all other ways of relating. This love is closely related to glory; an undefeated, outward looking, selfless and beautiful companionship that you and I are invited to live in when we say we will “turn to Christ” at our baptism.

And this is what marks out this church assembly from other groups that you or I may belong to. It marks us out from tribal politics, from single issue campaigns, from random gatherings of strangers. We want to invite strangers to become, with us, pilgrims; a free and open hearted invitation to love, with the clear

understanding that each and every one of us can say no.

And so we are invited to live distinctively. Why do we as a church commit to treading as lightly as we can on the earth by signing up to the Eco Church scheme – more of which we'll learn about in the annual meeting? Because of love.

Why do we get as many of us as possible to turn out on a Thursday night in Stratford to achieve change in housing policy in our city? Because of love.

Why do we want to talk about the future both of trades unions and conservative politics in our country? Why did we hang up a salvaged boat or make the Bethlehem Wall into a bridge? Why do we spend hours in meetings pouring over budgets and architects feasibility studies? Why do we urge as many of us here as possible to join our planned giving scheme? Why do we run a Night Shelter or take part in prison visiting? Because of love.

Not because of guilt or anxiety that we haven't changed the world sufficiently yet, or because we think we're a better church than anyone else.

Because of love, because we can't help ourselves but hope for a new world. This kind of love, which is a sign of glory, both balances budgets and works to be a good employer at the same time as speaking up in season and out of season for a more just world.

And the way we know about this love is the story of the cross – which is illustrated behind me. These abandoned grave clothes and green leaves that transform the cruel torture of crucifixion tell us that this love remains undefeated in the face of horrible violence, for it is love that believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (cf 1 Corinthians 13).

This love, which points to glory, is the essential core of a Christian church; because when we try to make the world better on our own, we soon run out of energy and start to get anxious, angry, overly self-critical.

And we become functional atheists, making plans with no room for God. The Spirit of God, the love at the heart of the universe has no room to breathe in such a church, no hospitable place to live. Without this love, we start to

believe that all this political action is what we are for, or about. And we indulge our guilt, which is a form of emotional greed, which devours our tender best intentions, destroying our fragile desire simply to live as open heartedly as we can. We very easily get stuck in patterns of thought and feeling, we remain victims and resist the transformation that is offered to us.

The invitation that's open to us, sometimes looks quite complicated to accept, but is deceptively simple. It is an invitation to be drenched in the life of God in the world God continually creates. Accepting this way of living will take us to the edge of ourselves, because we will inevitably face as the disciples faced, our own capacity for betrayal, our fears of change, and our complicity in an unjust world. And our task when we do face these realities, is not to sink into victimhood and stay there – that's the surest way to live a reduced life which finds no place for forgiveness - but to ask God for the strength to resist despair; to forgive ourselves and everyone about whom we bear ill will.

And so we will be known, not by our right onness or by our efficiency, not by our great architecture or by trying to be an inclusive church.

We will be known only and irreducibly, by this astonishing, adventurous, captivating and costly love. Amen.

Lucy Winkett