



30th August 2020
The 12th Sunday After Trinity
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

I preached earlier this month on the great epic bromance between Peter and Jesus, so I'm not going to go there again today. Instead let's spend some time looking at the Epistle because these really are some very fine words indeed from Paul today.

Now about 5 years ago I was on retreat. It was the third time I'd done an 8-day silent retreat but it was the first time that I had a retreat director who had a wicked sense of humour. And I would meet him for about an hour every morning before I went off walking in the Welsh hills. And he was sharp, funny, irreverent, and he was very into the Enneagram. Now I didn't know much about the Enneagram at that point, and it became a recurrent topic in our meetings together. And I found a book about the Enneagram in the retreat house library, with a little self-test quiz at the back and I worked out what type I was.

I'm sure that at St James's lots of you will know all about the Enneagram already. For those of you who don't know, the Enneagram is one of those systems of

classifying human personality. It's a bit like Myers-Briggs, if you've ever come across that. Now as someone who has always found other people a *complete mystery*, I love these sort of things. As a postgraduate academic, I got very into Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is a sort of fresh expression of Freud from the 1960s in France. Lacan came up a beautifully simple system that puts every human being into one of three diagnostic categories: everyone is either a neurotic, a psychotic or a pervert. It all comes down to your fundamental relationship to the phallus, which is the big symbolic penis which is the source of all meaning. I told you - it's both Freudian *and French*. I can *totally* see this catching on at St James's!

Now the Enneagram is a bit more complicated – it has 9 categories or types of personality – so you might be 'the performer', or 'the giver', or 'the sceptic'. Each type has its own besetting sins and temptations, and its particular potentialities. And like Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Enneagram teaches that you're locked into the type that you are. So although there's lots of scope for growth and development

within each type – you can't move from one type to another. Now because the Enneagram been taken up by Richard Rohr and the Christian retreat movement, they keep renaming the 9 types to try and make them sound a bit nicer and more focused on the positive potential within each type. But my retreat director wasn't having any of this. And by the second day, he's starting to speculate about which type I might be. Now I must confess I was not at my best at the beginning of this retreat. We were in a lovely big old retreat house looking out over the sea, but I'd been given a horrible pokey back-room in the attic and I was seething with resentment about this cross I had been given to bear.

And after two mornings of listening to me complain about my room, my director looked at me and said 'I think you might be a Type I.' Now that's not something anyone wants to hear! In the new nice positive labels for the 9 types, they call Type I 'the improver' or 'the reformer'. But my director's way of explaining Type I to me was to say "basically Type I means you're a bit of a judgemental bastard - and the nature of the Enneagram means that's probably not going to change. So the question you have to ask yourself is 'how, as a judgmental bastard, are you being called to love?'"

Now this was a very profound moment in my spiritual journey, that has stayed with me every since. Now the first thing I want to say for the record is that I'm *not* a Type I; I'm actually a Type 5 with wing-in-4, which means that on a good day I'm a visionary pioneer able to see the world in an entirely new way and on a bad day I'm just another vulnerable weirdo. But my director's comment really brought home to me that wherever and whoever we are; that whatever the nature of the circumstances in which we find ourselves; that wherever we have got to in terms of sorting out our own personal emotional baggage – all the disappointments, grievances, and trauma of the past that we're all dragging around with us; that however overwhelmed and confused and directionless we might feel in our current situation, all we ever need to do is to stop and ask ourselves 'How am I being called to love right now?' Because Christian holiness has always been measured – not by prayerfulness, not by the mystic experience of divine consolation, nor the ability to understand complex theological doctrines – but simply and purely by the depth of a person's charity to others.

And what's so wonderful about this extract from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, nearly 2,000 years old, is that if we're not clear what love is (and let's not pretend

that love is always obvious and uncomplicated) we get this beautiful illustration of what love looks like in daily life.

- Let your love be genuine. Be sincere and authentic in the presentation of who you are.
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Be honest about your imperfections; admit your mistakes.
- Extend hospitality and generosity to people without thinking about what you will get in return.
- Outdo one another in showing honour – that is, intentionally try to act better than the people around you, rather than – as we so often do - using other people’s poor behaviour to justify our own.

And then the really tough one: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Surely that is one of the single most difficult aspects of living as a Christian: that other people’s rotten behaviour towards you does not let you off the hook from living a life of love. Last Monday, Jane, who puts together our daily readings for Holding the Silence, our little in-house daily office that we say on YouTube at 12 noon on weekdays, included a wonderful quotation from William Blake, baptised in this very place in 1757: ‘The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness.’

Every time we pray The Lord’s Prayer, as we’ll do again when we shortly celebrate the Eucharist together, we pray to be forgiven our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us*. That there is a *correlation* between our forgiveness of others and our experience of divine forgiveness.

Not - I firmly believe - that God *withholds* her forgiveness of us if we do not forgive others, but rather that it is difficult for us to fully experience and know the love and forgiveness of God if we are holding onto resentments against other people. As Paul writes elsewhere in his Letter to the Ephesians: ‘Do not let resentment lead you into sin; the sunset must not find you still angry. Do not give the devil his opportunity.’

The real daily grind of Christian discipleship is in maintaining a prayerful loyalty to Our Lord whilst living in community with other people, amidst all the incessant antagonisms of human relationships. And one of the quickest routes to God-consciousness, to an awareness of the person whom God is calling us each to be, and of our resistance to that call, is through those interpersonal interactions where we feel most provoked.

An essential practice in the tool-box of daily Christian living is to *pray* for people that we are having difficulties with, as well as people that we find easy to love. Because

forgiveness is a virtue that we do not achieve on our own but through the grace of God. But if we're honest with ourselves there is often quite a bit more scope for us to actually *request* the grace of forgiveness through prayer, and to intentionally foster and co-operate with that grace.

Now of course forgiveness is not synonymous with a failure to act and the continuing endurance of injustice. But it does mean not responding out of our hatred, not acting out of our wounded pride in a way that will exacerbate the level of hostility. And forgiveness does not mean waiting until our anger and resentment has nearly subsided, and then thinking 'Well, perhaps I can forgive that person now'. Forgiveness often means actively taking control of the way we feel and seeking to change it.

There is a wonderful prayer practice called the Prayer of Loving Kindness, in which you prayerfully cultivate in your heart a reservoir of loving kindness; and then you share it in prayer first with someone you love; and then with someone you feel neutrally about; and then with someone you actively dislike or resent. Intentionally cultivating and sharing the light of Christ, and sincerely praying for your adversary to be well, to be happy, to be filled with all the fullness of God. Next time we have a quiet

day, I'll teach you that prayer if you don't know it already.

And it can be a real prayer of insight. Sometimes we see that actually, on a closer and more prayerful inspection of events, that we haven't really been sinned against at all. Sometimes it's that we just haven't got the outcome that we wanted in a situation, and we're upset and indignant about that. Sometimes it's because our own fragilities are being triggered, and our anxiety and shame about our own shortcomings is manifesting as criticism of other people. Other times maybe we see that, whatever way you look at it, we are absolutely in the right. No one would dispute that we *have* been sinned against. And then, by the grace of God, we really *do* have something to forgive.

I'd like to end with a prayer by Leslie Weatherhead, a liberal Methodist minister from the last century. He was somewhat rebellious, a bit reclusive, and fond of unconventional theological ideas. He was probably a Type 5. And he has left us some very fine prayers, and this one is printed at the end of your service sheet in case you might want to use it in your own personal prayers this week:

Teach us, O Lord, to reserve our anger for those things which would anger you.

Help us to get our perspective right by our communion with you, so that irritating trifles may be seen to be trifling and the irritation allayed; so that injuries done to us may be seen in the perspective of all our injuries to you.

In the light of your patience with, and mercy towards us, help us more readily to forgive others with the genuine restoration of relationship which we claim between ourselves and you.

And, Lord, let the maintaining of that relationship matter more to us than anything in the world, for in it is our only hope, and in its growing fullness is life both here and hereafter.

Amen