

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 5th May 2019, Easter 3

Readings: **Acts 9:1-6**

Revelation 5:6-14

Psalm 30

John 21:1-19

Over the years I have loved the musical movie 'Fiddler on the Roof' because it's a great story, with terrific characters, and wonderful songs. I enjoy the way that Tevye prays in many places, and the way that he loves his daughters as they grow up, even when they make decisions he doesn't understand. As his daughters marry for love Tevye finds himself thinking about his own arranged marriage to his wife Golde. In about the middle of the movie there is a lovely moment when he turns to her and sings this important question, 'Do you love me?' She is surprised and doesn't want to answer, but Tevye persists and sings the question again, 'Do you love me?'

Golde responds to him thoughtfully with these lyrics, 'For twenty-five years, I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, why talk about love right now?' Then to herself she sings, 'For twenty-five years, I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. For twenty-five years, my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?' And she concludes by supposing that she does love him! And he concludes by supposing that he does love her! And each affirms to the other that it's reassuring to know!

The American family therapist Gary Chapman suggests that people primarily experience love in five very different ways: through acts of service, through quality time together, through receiving gifts, through words of affirmation, and through physical touch. Chapman calls them 'love languages' and he suggests that even though there are five individuals, we each have a primary love language. This means that one of the five love languages speaks more powerfully to us than the other four. So, hypothetically, if your primary love language is 'quality time together' and your partner gives you gifts, takes care of everything in the house, hugs you, while affirming you with spoken and written words... you're still not feeling that loved because you yearn for them to just spend some time with you. You can see they're trying hard... but, they're not quite hitting the mark! I wonder if you've ever thought about this, and what your primary love language might be?

In the Gospel today Jesus asked Peter three times, 'Do you love me?' He didn't sing the question because it would have been an emotionally charged, real-life conversation. Traditionally these three questions are interpreted as a counterpoint to Peter denying Jesus three times after he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In some way this is a safe way of interpreting this Gospel encounter because all of the focus is on Peter, and we are just observers. But, how would we respond if Jesus met with us later today and asked the same question: 'Do you love me?'

Most people who read or listen to this homily would identify themselves as Christian – so if we imagine someone looking at the way we live our lives, what evidence is there to suggest that we love Christ? Indeed, what evidence is there to suggest that we even believe in God?

Remember when Jesus was challenged by a lawyer to name the most important of the six hundred and thirteen laws of his Jewish religion he spoke about loving God and loving neighbour. Clearly love of God and love of neighbour is central to our faith, so let's try and unpack what this might look like using Gary Chapman's five 'love languages' as an initial framework.

I wonder what 'quality time' with God looks like for you? My hunch is that it is in prayer, in worship, and in reading the Bible. Remember Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof prayed on his cart, in his house, and in his barn. He sang set prayer before a meal, and conversational prayer in many places, and in all these there is a reminder that we can pray anywhere. So where do you and I find it easiest to pray? In the house, in the garden, in the car, while walking, or while sitting? Is there a sense of energised vitality in that prayer relationship, or are you feeling pretty dry at the moment in this area of your life?

We listen to readings in church, but reading the Bible at home in a structured way, is also incredibly life-giving. Thoughtfully and prayerfully reading the Bible is also a way to spend 'quality time' with God.

In prayer we can give and receive words of affirmation, and in prayer and sacrament we may even have a sense of being physically touched by God. We are encouraged to give to God some portion of our time, our abilities, and our finances...as gifts, back to the God whom we believe is the greatest gift giver.

And maybe all the different ministries in the Church can be understood as 'acts of service'? Whether it's some form of pastoral care, or administration, or ministry with children, or outreach to the homeless, or helping to lead worship... all these, and so much more, motivated by our love for God and neighbor.

Jesus asked Peter three times, 'Do you love me?' and each time in response Peter said, 'Yes!' And, each time Peter responded Jesus gave a clear direction: 'Feed my lambs!' 'Tend my sheep!' 'Feed my sheep!'

As we have imagined Jesus asking us if we love him, and our positive response to this question, I think we can go on to imagine Jesus giving us the same direction, 'Feed my lambs!' 'Tend my sheep!' 'Feed my sheep!' . If we accept this, as individuals and congregations, who are the 'lambs' and 'sheep' we are feeding, and who are the 'sheep' we are tending?

In asking who are the 'lambs and sheep' I'm inviting you, and me, to think of particular people that we know. It may be helpful to write their names down to get clarity, and once we're clear about who they are then we can think about how we are helping to feed and tend these people in their journeys of life and faith. And, potentially, how we can better do these things.

Certainly plenty to take into prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. In your grace, give us wisdom and joy as we express our love for you, and love those you have given us to share life with. We pray in the name of the one who shares life with us, Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.