

## Reflection on loving God

Rev Norman Wilkins - May 21 2017 at St Ronan's

If we take John seriously, what being a follower of Jesus is all about is loving each other (which is the point I tried to make last time I was here). Things have not changed concerning this love thing; it is the most essential ingredient for a church or any organisation thriving.

A few years ago, a young family I know pretty well were very involved in their local church, up to their eyes in it. The minister of the church left and they were involved in the committee to find a new minister. It was obvious the previous minister had held things together, as good ministers often do. Once the church lost its minister people fell out with each other, criticised and in no way could be described as loving each other. The young family left disillusioned, much to the sadness of some of the more sensible members of that church.

That church fulfilled the saying "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets" In other words that church fellowship was perfectly designed to disillusion people and drive them to leave.

We know that applies to political parties, as soon as ordinary people detect that the leaders of the party are not getting along and there are power struggles, then the party is all set to lose support.

We hate to see and hear people arguing or families falling apart, yet it can make us feel really good just seeing a couple walking along hand in hand.

This command to love extends outside the people who come to church on Sundays. It extends to those whom they have contact with. Going beyond John's Gospel to Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan makes it quite clear that we should love our neighbour, not just our family, or our church family, it is our neighbour and in today's global world that extends very far and wide.

People outside the church expect us to act lovingly towards others, to be Good Samaritans, and if we don't then we are regarded as hypocrites. Everyone knows we bang on about love, so we had better do it.

In my opinion, most churches are pretty good at that, if church people got out of social programmes either as individual volunteers or in the name of the church, then our society would be in a real mess. The church may be numerically shrinking, but it is still true that our society depends on us to do what we do.

In Jesus' time those with leprosy, Samaritans, women to some extent, tax collectors that co-operated with the occupying Roman forces were all groups that religious people tended to be slow to get stuck in and help. I guess that people back then would be kind to their respectable neighbours, but someone from one of those groups would not be so likely to get unqualified love.

Those groups are no longer with us but I think we could do with being a bit more adventurous in what we do, we can be a rather selective Good Samaritan in whom we help.

Speaking personally, I have a degree of racism and I have to stop myself sometimes looking at poor people and thinking that if they had more energy they could turn their lives around. So I am not that Good a Samaritan.

However, Linda and I were part of that rather wild but very good natured “Pride” parade in Wellington a few weeks ago to support transgender people. There was a contingent from the Salvation Army and a few of us from St. Andrew’s, but the faith groups’ contingent didn’t have many church people supporting it. Churches are not that visible in doing what they can to pressure the government over climate change as a more significant example.

I was reading a chapter in a book called the once and future church written by Karen Armstrong, and she pointed out that all the founders of the modern religions were people who stood out as different from those around them.

Their values were not the ones of their society. However, the Church hasn’t followed in that tradition. We are usually far from innovative in standing up for people whom the rest of society hasn’t yet learned to fully accept.

However, we are most definitely needed, unadventurous and a bit prejudiced maybe. I went to the launch of a book called “the New Zealand Project” by a young man called Max Harris. His central point is that our community has become more technocratic, individualistic and selfish were the words he used. I suspect that many of us can sense the truth of that in how bureaucracy treats people and the attitude that seems to lie behind lots of organisations that are no longer personal, with staff who work for them loyally year in year out, but have changed to what we call a corporate attitude with lots of change including staff turnover. Everything seems to be driven by the bottom line and the place run by managers who actually don’t know much about the core business.

For example, hospitals used to be run by matrons who knew the system through and through and all the staff on the ward knew she would know exactly how things should be done a whole lot better than the ward staff did. Now the managers probably wouldn’t be able to find the ward.

Max Harris said we needed to be driven by values and he named three core ones, care for others, community, and creativity. We certainly care and we work for community, maybe we need to be a bit more creative in how we do and whom we do it for. Max Harris said actually there were 3 ½ values, the half is love. On being questioned about that he said he had been taken to task for mentioning love but actually love sort of covered the other three.

We are the leaven that society needs, so we mustn’t think we are just a dying vestige from the past. So in terms of practical love, we have a lot to get our teeth into.

John refers to loving Jesus, but there isn’t that much made of the point that the other three Gospels record of Jesus affirming a Pharisee who says the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with

all your heart, mind and strength as well as what we have been talking about which is love your neighbour as yourself.

Back in Jesus' time there was no doubt what was meant by God as mentioned in the Gospels. It was the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Elijah and all the rest of those men and women who were the foundational heroes of the nation of Israel.

There were of course other gods, the gods of the Roman empire. In the time of the early church there was Mithras for example who was worshipped by the Roman army in particular and there was also the cult of worshipping the Roman emperor.

When the earlier Hebrew scriptures were written there were the Baals, the heather gods of the other tribes that lived around Israel. Then came the gods of the Greeks. So there was, and always had been a choice, but when the Gospels refer to worshipping God there was no doubt what was meant by that God.

This is not much different from today. Of course, there is the God of the Muslims, Allah, but actually Allah is not that different from the God of the Jews and Christians. I expect that most Muslims regard Allah as being a bit more intolerant of our human weaknesses and a bit harsher, and that probably reflects the societies where Muslims predominate. Modern Western Christianity tends to reflect our softer society in how people imagine their god.

I don't believe it is the name we give our God that matters, and I don't believe it matters whether we think of that God as a real objective spiritual being or whether our god is the best of our inner selves, our ideals. I think all that matters is what that god leads us to do and be like as people.

With that in mind, there are the equivalents today of the real pagan gods, the obsession with possessions, beauty, fitness, popularity, success in work or sport, anything actually that is selfish or self-absorbed. They can be worshipped with considerable enthusiasm but they do not bring life as it is meant to be.

I read the story of Wangari and her trees of peace. She was loving God's creation and doing so with a real passion and commitment. She may not claim to be Christian, but she is honouring God through her commitment to this world in her selfless way.

I would see that as loving God with her heart, mind and strength. She was obeying that first commandment because of her passion for what was good. However, she would name her god, that god led her to passionately serve this world in a selfless way and I believe that is what counts.

A selfless love that serves God's will and doing so with passion and commitment is I believe the way to live with God's Spirit and experience eternal life right now.

*Rev Norman Wilkins*