

Havens of Deep and Supportive Love
Fifth Sunday, Year C
John 13: 31-35
2 May 2010

Ask me to hazard a guess at the most popular hobby and recreational groups in Christchurch and I would be inclined to put my money on the bridge club and the vintage car club. In a way particular to the social geography of our city many people get a kick out of staring hard at their cards around a green topped table, or in mucking around in the innards of retro vehicles. Along the way of pursuing these particular common interests I am sure friendships are formed, a social life develops, and people help each other out from time to time. But that is incidental to what brings them together, and of course I am sure that a certain element of rivalry and competitiveness is what helps to make it fun as well.

Looking back on over a half a lifetime in the Church I am sure one of the effects has been to improve my social skills, and perhaps my intimacy skills. There have been times when I have felt out of my depth in complex and demanding pastoral situations. In the midst of the anxiety and confusion I have comforted myself with the thought – this is more interesting than selling cars. And of course I have had to grow and expand as a person to be able to meet these sorts of demands. But the most significant effect of church membership has been the meeting and mixing with a wider range of people than would have come my way had I been left to my own devices in shaping my social world. What is more, moving within this more varied people matrix proceeds along the agenda of not just getting along with people, but

also, wherever possible, of loving them just as Christ loves me.

There have been times when I have been tempted to give up on people, and to use the usual exclusion tactics, and then a warning voice sounds within my conscience – just remember this is a sister or brother for whom Christ died.

I mention this because we have just heard Jesus issue a firm request that the communities bearing his name and reputation be what George Beasley-Murray calls – havens of deep and supportive love. He goes on to point out that in a world where communities of love are less and less common a community that is indeed that will exercise a strong pull of attraction. And Christians need their local church to be a haven of deep and supportive love so as to strengthen and encourage them in the face of an indifferent secular world. We need to be loved by our fellow Christians so as to be refreshed and renewed in getting on with our ministries in the outside world.

So what does this loving of one another actually consist of in its content and style? I was tempted to call this sermon – love me tender, love me true – but that would have had the unhelpful implication that it is a matter of hugs and cuddles all round. Instead I am going to suggest that it is a matter of exercising a considered and appropriate hospitality to one another, in a way that is particular to each personal situation, and which has the overall aim of building up the common good of our church.

Thomas Aquinas defined Christian love as seeking the best interests of the other. It sounds rather cold blooded as a definition of love, but then he was a rather rational person. And when it comes to loving

the sister or brother for whom Christ died it is desirable that the waxing and waning of our variable emotions not rule us. Some clear thinking about what they actually need from us for their further development as a Christian is helpful. The issue then becomes – who is this person on the road to becoming as Christ draws them towards the fullness of who he intends them to be – and what small self-forgetting role might I have in helping to make that happen?

Let's remember that Christ is their saviour, not us. Humility is a precious Christian character trait in the business of getting alongside another Christian. It is the art of keeping the self out of it, of not requiring emotional goods from them, as we journey with them for a small part of the way on the road to the fullness of the Kingdom.

When we come together for worship it is highly desirable that we keep a weather eye out for those who are worshipping with us to see if they require some discrete act of service that will help them to use unfamiliar Service books, or to become attuned to the startling novelty of our particular worship customs. A word of welcome for a new person is a great thing to offer, and if we can follow that up with a low key warm interest in them that leads to further contact, then we will have done a much-appreciated work for the Kingdom.

In every congregation there will be difficult people. How else could it be given the fallenness of humanity, and the way in which the gospel promise of healing and forgiveness draws wounded people like a moth to a flame. How a church responds to them says a lot about its Christian maturity, and its capacity for Christ like love. We should neither allow them to

take over the agenda of our life together, nor exclude them with a ruthless exit strategy. The ability to set boundaries, and to exercise patience is important here. The exercise of firm leadership is part of Christian loving in such situations. Always there will be the nagging uncertainty as to whether fellow Christians have found us to be difficult at times, and there will be the certainty that our loving heavenly Father has shown great patience towards us in times past.

Sometimes conflict crops up in congregations. It can become intense when there is something worth fighting for. When a Christian sister or brother becomes an opponent, even an enemy in such a conflict situation, a great test of Christian character is required of us. We should continue to treat them honourably, courteously, with no underhand tactics used to advance our cause, or to discredit them. The ability to fight cleanly is something the Anglican Communion needs right now, both at a national and at a worldwide level.

I began by talking about the bridge club and the vintage car club. A common interest brings them together. We have got one too. If we forget it then we are lost. We are not a social club. We are not an Anglican culture group. It is our participation and our sharing in the deep things of the Christian God that unites us, and that provides the agenda of our life together. A belief in his saving love for us, the courage to risk being mocked for being a Christian, a commitment to the high ethical standards expected of Christ's followers, a looking forward to being with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in that future, fulfilled time called the Kingdom— this is the stuff of our shared life that we must cling to –

because it is what generates our Christian loving of one another.