

The Great Dance of Love – Rev Keith King

Last week the readings reminded us of the unconditional love of God.

This week the readings invite us to join in the great dance of love.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are to love he has loved them, and Jesus has loved them like God has loved him.

If we want to know what it means to love we must see how Jesus loves us and how God loved him.

Through John's Gospel there are clues as to just how deep the Love of God for Jesus is:

1. God gives Jesus the entire world (3:55) therefore love is about generosity;
2. God shares everything with Jesus and brings Jesus into his confidence (5:20) therefore love is about trust;
3. God gives Jesus a role to play (1:12) therefore love is about responsibility and meaning.

Jesus modeled all these things for his disciples.

And he takes that love a step further. He tells his disciples they are not servants or employees who take instructions and simply do as they are told; but they are friends – they are confidants and intimates. Their relationship is not built on contracts and agreements but on the strong bonds of friendship.

And he reminds them that, like him, they are chosen and called, not just as individuals but as community of sisters and brothers.

So followers of Jesus are chosen and called, both as individuals and as a community; they are to love with generosity, with trust and with responsibility and meaning; and that love is to be shared in a relationship of equality and friendship.

The early Christian community found this concept confusing and baffling as our reading from the Acts tells us.

This community was initially a Jewish sect and they required converts to be circumcised as all male Jews are circumcised. But then the church leaders are confounded.

After sharing the Good News a group of uncircumcised Gentiles receive God's gift of the Spirit. This had never happened before. What were the Jewish believers to do?

The bureaucratic option was always available – that is to create a new sub group or an order within the new community that would give these Gentiles certain rights and responsibilities; acknowledging that God had blessed them with the gift of the Spirit, whilst restricting “full” membership only to those who had undergone circumcision.

The Church is good at doing that!

Inspirationally Peter takes a different course of action. He recognises that God's generous gift of Love is for all and there is nothing to stop these people becoming full members of the Community of Christ.

I heard on the radio this week that people rarely learn from history and this is certainly true in the life of the Church over the intervening centuries.

People have been, and still are, excluded from full participation in the life and the work of the Community of Christ because of their gender, their race, their sexual orientation and even their levels of intelligence...

Jean Vanier is a Catholic philosopher and humanitarian who became aware of the thousands of people who had been institutionalised with developmental disabilities.

He had a simple philosophy that all people are broken but that for some their brokenness is more obvious and visible.

He believed that true communities of love can change the world and so the L'Arche communities evolved. These were intentional living environments where so called 'able bodied' and so called 'disabled' people lived together

equally. By 2007 there were 130 L'Arche communities in 30 countries across the globe.

The Roman Catholic Priest and academic Henri Nouwen joined one of these communities, called Daybreak, in the USA. He wrote a fantastic book called 'Journey to Daybreak' in which he documents his own personal struggle in living in a community such as this and continuing to exercise an academic teaching ministry.

His work meant that he would often give lectures and talks but the philosophy of the community also meant that he treated as equals those with serious intellectual disabilities.

He began to take one of the community members with him on speaking engagements and allow them to speak to the gathered audience.

At first he struggled with embarrassment but then his heart expanded and he began to see the gift that these individuals brought with their simplicity and uncomplicated agendas.

He learnt to love as Jesus asks us to love – with generosity, with trust and by giving responsibility and meaning to these people who accompanied him.

When I think of unconditional love I am always reminded of my favourite saint, St Francis of Assisi.

There is a wonderful story that tells of his repulsion of people with leprosy.

One day whilst walking down the road he was confronted by a leper sitting in the street. Everything in him urged him to cross the road and ignore this man; but he girded his loins went up to him and kissed him and as soon as he had done so the man turned into the figure of Christ.

The day care centre in Northland who recently excluded a child with AIDS would do well to hear such stories and those of Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities.

When we think of love, the prayer of St Francis really says it all:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

May those words be ours as we explore our journey of life, and with the Risen Christ, may we too join that Great Dance of Love...