

Sermon for St Pauls Ipswich
21 June 2014.

“Love demands a Response”

It's amazing how conditional we have become. Everything has “Terms and Conditions” attached to them. If you download an update to your computer you have to agree to the terms and conditions. Who has time to read all the terms and conditions? Who even understands them? At the end of the day I just figure that if I don't click the box to indicate that I accept the terms and conditions than I not going to be able to use this new piece of software or for that matter the old piece of software that I've been using for ages that has now a small upgrade made to it.

And it's not just software packages that have terms and conditions attached to it. Try booking an airfare without agreeing to Terms and conditions. I did start to read them once. The more I read the less I understood, so I gave up. I confess that I just ticked the box that says I have read them and have no idea what I just agreed to but I reckon that's exactly what they expect will be the case.

We attach terms and conditions to our personal lives as well. We tend to be nice to the people who are nice to us. We expect that those we love will love us in return. But that's not the way it's supposed to be is it? I always thought that love was supposed to be unconditional. It's supposed to be that way. God loves us regardless. The parable of the prodigal son seems to be about God loving us unconditionally. A couple of weeks ago we heard Pentecost is about new life and new creation; it's about breaking down barriers; it's about relationships of deeper love and understanding; it's about seeking (and finding) God's forgiveness; it's about learning to live in the world with hearts and minds open to God's peace and justice. It sounded idyllic. .

Last week we heard that, “Doubt, or being in ‘two places at the same time’ does not disqualify us from being in the presence of Jesus.” Ok so we don't need to be perfect. That's great.

All these are very comforting words and they reassure us of Gods loving kindness towards us and all of Gods creation. So they should. Pentecost is about empowering the church, Trinity about the way in which we encounter the Godhead.

There's no ifs buts or maybe's. No “terms and conditions”

But then this morning we hear the words of Jesus telling us that things are not quite so rosy.

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

daughter against her mother,

and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

For I have come to set

stand against her

Whoever loves

This presents us with a bit of a curve ball. On the one hand we are being reassured that all is good, all is wonderful and then ... There seems, on the surface at least, to be a dark side.

It got me thinking. Are the conditions attached to our relationship with God

So I did a search for the word “Unless” through the Gospels. No I didn’t Google it, I did it old school. I dug out my old Crudens Concordance of the Old and New Testament. Among the references I found were these.

Matthew 5.20:

For I tell you, **unless** your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18.3:

and said, ‘Truly I tell you, **unless** you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’

Luke 13.3:

No, I tell you; but **unless** you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Luke 13.5:

No, I tell you; but **unless** you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

John 6.44:

No one can come to me **unless** drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

John 6.53:

So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, **unless** you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’

John 6.65:

And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me **unless** it is granted by the Father.’

John 8.24:

I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins **unless** you believe that I am he.’*

John 12.24:

Very truly, I tell you, **unless** a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 13.8:

Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘**Unless** I wash you, you have no share with me.’

John 15.4:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself **unless** it abides in the vine, neither can you **unless** you abide in me.
Then I decided to look up the word if.

Matthew 6.14:

For **if** you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

Matthew 6.15:

but **if** you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 16.24:

Then Jesus told his disciples, '**If** any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Matthew 18.19:

Again, truly I tell you, **if** two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. That at least sounds a little better.

And on to this morning Gospel reading that seems to demand so much from us, bringing conflict into the closest of relationships. It's not an easy passage to hear because it confronts some of our most precious principles. It seems to even contravene the commandment to honour Father and Mother. And there's talk of taking up your cross. This stuff wasn't mention when Jesus called his disciple to leave their nets and become fishers of men.

Our second reading from Paul letter to the Romans gives us a bit of a clue.

*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?
2By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?*

Gods love freely given demands a response from us. Well when you think of it, that makes sense doesn't it? If we are given a gift, in order to benefit from it we must use it. When we are the recipients of an act of kindness we want to respond with gratitude. Its not just because it's the polite thing to do, its not even just because it our duty, or to fulfill an expectation that we respond. We respond with gratitude because we want to express our appreciation. It's our response that demonstrates the impact of that gift. Our response to Gods love is borne out by the changes that take place in our lives.

As Paul said, "How can we who have died to sin? Go on living in it? If we want to put it another way we could say, " how could we who have come to know the great love of God continue to live as if we did not know God's love?

So rather than God's love being conditional, it is simply that Love demands a response.

As for the prospect that Jesus comes to bring the sword. There is here no veiled endorsement of war but reference to the reality of persecution that the early

church was experiencing. As Matthew was writing his gospel he would have been well aware of the opposition that the gospel was experiencing for the traditional Jewish leaders. Any new idea divides. We have seen it over and over again throughout history. None of us would argue that slavery is a good thing but at a time when the world was stumbling toward it abolition nations were divided on the subject. It was one of the issues at the centre of the American civil war. The Interpreter's Bible commentary even points out that inscription in early Babylon give testimony to the fact that new ideas bring division. Jesus would have been only too aware of the rising opposition against his teaching and the inevitability of his crucifixion.

It is not desired, it is never desired but the reality of the situation is that standing up for our faith brings division. It can even bring division into families. The recent news of the High Court ruling on the Federal Government funding of the school Chaplaincy programme has highlighted the division that exists in the community concerning this programme. The thing that I find exasperating is the level of misunderstanding and confusion that exist between this what this programme is all about and the teaching of religious education in schools.

Gods love demands a response. We cannot remain neutral, either we accept it or we refuse it, there is no middle ground. Those who accept it can expect that there will be those who consider us fools and spare little energy in letting us know their opinion. They will wish to exclude our opinion from public debate and they will use mistakes of the past to condemn us and they will refuse to acknowledge the good that has been done in the name of Christ.

But that is a small thing. It is a small thing compared to the persecution experience by the earliest of Christians. It is a small thing compared to the persecution experienced by our Sudanese brothers and sisters that drove them from their homeland. It is a small this compared to the price paid by our Lord himself.

It is clear from all the passages that I have mentioned that if we truly believe, if we truly have experience the love of God, then we will respond positively, we will take up our cross and follow Jesus, not out of a sense of duty, not because its polite to do so but because every fibre of our being cries out in response. C S Lewis referred to himself as a reluctant Christian. There was much about going to church that he loathed but he could not deny the truth he saw in the gospel. His very being demanded that he respond. So may it be for us, that our very being cries out with love for the one who first loved us. AMEN