

JOHN 13.34-35: LET'S LOVE AS JESUS LOVED US

[Chelmsford 13 February 2011]

Let me begin with a parable

"Have you ever felt like a frog? You know the type of thing I mean - stone cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless - all by yourself in the middle of a pond! I have! And I've met plenty of others. We have one in our house nearly every morning. The only thing missing is the pond!

The frog blues (or should I say greens) come when

- you want to be bright, especially first thing in the morning, and you can't*
- you want to share, but are selfish*
- you want to feel thankful, but feel resentment*
- you want to be honest with others, but keep wearing a mask*
- you want to be somebody, but feel a nobody*
- you want to care, but the required effort makes you indifferent*
- you want to make friends, but will they*

If we are honest we have probably all sat on that lily pad in the middle of the pond. Often we have sat there for ages, too frightened or disgusted to jump off and swim. Maybe you're still on that lily pad, floating around and round - all froggy like, fed up and lonely.

Others we meet in our small groups or in everyday contact come across as frogs. They are so hard to love. Their personality doesn't attract others to them. They are either slow, shy, withdrawn and negative, or they are dominant, autocratic, forcing their opinions on others. Cold unattractive frogs. You feel repulsed by them and want to ignore or throw a rock at them.

A parable might help: Once upon a time there was a frog. he was really a handsome prince under the nasty spell of a wicked witch. Only the kiss of a beautiful maiden could save him. So there he sat - unkissed prince of his lilypond kingdom. But you've guessed it! One day a beautiful maiden saw him, was overcome with pity, grabbed him and kissed him. Bingo! In a moment of time he stood transformed before her, a handsome prince. And you can guess the finish!

SO WHAT is the task of the church/ To KISS FROGS of course!"

Churches are full of frogs - those "cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless" things. All of us can name people

- whom we find unlovable
- who rub us up the wrong way,
- who we do our best to avoid,
- whom we would never dream inviting back home for coffee.

Yet Jesus calls us to love such people - for he loved people such as us.

"I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13.34, 35).

"Love one another" - but how? How are we to kiss the frogs in our church?

For starters, let's face up to the fact that *love*, if it means anything at all, *must be expressed*. Hands up any man who's loved a girl, but never kissed her!

Love is always more than gooey feelings. This was certainly true of Jesus.

John tells us: **"He had had always loved those in the world who were his own, and he loved them to the very end"** (Jn 13.1). In the light of that love he washed his disciples feet he gave his life on a Cross.

Jesus calls us to be equally practical.

"As I have loved you, so you also must love one another".

We are to express our love for one another in ways which our tangible and real.

This morning I want to give four very simple illustrations of what it means to **"love one another"** by reference to four other **"one another"** texts in the NT.

1. TO LOVE IS TO GREET ONE ANOTHER

Rom 16.16: **"Greet one another with a holy kiss"**

a) *greet one another*

I shall never forget visiting a flourishing *Baptist church in Nairobi*. Caroline & I had been missionaries in Congo/Zaire for some 18 months - it had been a pretty barren time spiritually - and here we were, after 18 months of French services, in our first English-language service. We arrived early for the service - and saw a large multi-cultural congregation hugging & greeting one another - but nobody greeted us. When the service was over, we stayed in our seats, hoping that someone would come up to us & greet us. Nobody did. We slunk out of that church feeling so miserable, so alone. True, we might have taken the initiative in going up to somebody - but we hadn't the spiritual energy - and we walked out with even less spiritual energy.

Is it possible for people to enter our church and leave without a welcome? One reason I stand at the door as people leave is to ensure that never happens. But, of course, the call to **'greet one another'** is not addressed just to ministers - but to every member of a church.

b) greet one another by name

When you get home, read Rom 16: a remarkable chapter - a list of names: "**Greetings to Prisca & Aquila... to my dear friend Epaphroditus... Greetings to Mary... to Andronicus & Junia...to Ampliatus & Urbanus... to Stachys, my dear friend.. to Apelles .. those who belong to the family of Aristobulus..**" And so the list goes on: Greetings are also sent to **Herodion, the family of Narcissus, Tryphaena & Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus and his mother, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus & his sister, Olympas....**

Is anybody expecting a baby & stuck for a name? Plenty of choice here!

Paul greeted people by name - and in greeting people by name, showed that ***they counted***.

The same is true of the Lord Jesus: in John 10.3 we read that the Good Shepherd "**calls his own sheep by name**". Jesus calls us by name.

And we on this Name Tag Sunday I want to say we too should call one another by name. For to call a person by name is to show they count.

But you say: "*There are too many people in the church to get to know*".

I don't believe you. I read of one American pastor who claimed to know all 16,000 of his members by name. OK that is an extreme case, but it does show the importance Americans tend to attach to names. When English people say they have a bad memory for names, by & large they are not telling the truth. What in effect they are saying is, "*I can't be bothered; I am too lazy*". Or are we believe that Americans are cleverer than us?

c) greet one another with a holy kiss

Peterson: "***Holy embraces all round***". Wow!

What's more this is no isolated teaching of Scripture.

We find the same injunction in 1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.23; 1 Thess 5.26; 1 Pet 5.14

Kissing was obviously perfectly acceptable in the early church.

But some might object: "*A kiss was fair enough in the culture of Paul's day, but it doesn't belong to 21C Britain*". That is true - we are not like the French or the Italian. Although society is changing. Just the other week I was kissed by a Scotsman!

But at the end of the day, kissing is not the issue. What Paul was trying to say was this: ***show affection to one another***. Express your love for one another in a tangible manner, whether it be through a kiss, a bear hug, or just a holding of the hand.

2. TO LOVE IS TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

1 Thess 5.11: "**Encourage one another and help one another**"

a) *encourage one another*

William James: "*The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated*"
We all need appreciated - we all need encouragement. As the Americans put it, we all need to be 'stroked'.

The fact is that few of us remain on a perpetual even keel - all of us have our ups and downs - all of us need a brother or sister to speak a word of encouragement into our lives.

A legend is told of how God decided to reduce the weapons in the Devil's armoury. Satan could choose only one "fiery dart". He chose the power of discouragement. "*If only I can persuade Christians to be thoroughly discouraged, they will make no further effort and I shall be enthroned in their lives*".

Let's ensure that the Devil has no place in our fellowship - let's resolve to encourage one another - indeed, let me practical: what about seeking to find someone different to *encourage once a day!*

b) *encourage the servants of the church*

When did you last encourage

- the members of the worship band? Or do you instead simply tend to criticise them when they play too loudly?
- a Light Factory leader or helper? Or frankly don't you bother because you haven't got children of that particular age
- Those who prepare communion & wash up? Maybe you don't even know them!
- The church treasurer? Or did you instead criticise him for using too small a font when he presented his figures at the last church meeting

c) *encourage... & build one another up*

The context here is one of *death and bereavement*. There were people in the church at Thessalonica who were finding the deaths of some of their friends hard to handle.

The fact is that bereavement can be a shattering experience - and as those of you who have lost loved ones know, grieving isn't done within a matter of days - it goes on for months.

Alas sometimes we feel embarrassed to talk to people about their loved ones who have died. Are we not just opening up old wounds? I believe not. We are simply showing that we remember. Let's not be afraid to talk, and in the context of such talking encourage one another - for we have a hope that goes beyond death itself.

3. TO LOVE IS TO HELP CARRY ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

Gal 6.2 "**Help to carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ**"

a) *Burdens are common to us all*

When Paul writes "**help to carry one another's burdens**", he assumes that we all have burdens. And that is true. I have yet to meet a person able to go through life trouble-free. Some may appear to live a more charmed existence than others - and yet underneath the smiling exterior all kinds of hurts all too often lurk. Life may not be a perpetual burden, but there are times when life is very much a burden.

Not to admit to those times when life is tough is to live a lie.

Indeed the people whom Jesus constantly attacked were religious people who pretended to be what they weren't – Jesus called them 'hypocrites'.

Let's not fall foul of Jesus. Let us *be open* with one another and cast our masks aside and so begin to be real. It could prove to be *a liberating experience*

- *for others*, who may be tempted to believe that they are alone in their pain. Sometimes we think we're the only ones with problems - look at others & think that for them life is bed of roses. Time & time again we are mistaken.
- *for ourselves* - time & again thro our pride we deprive ourselves of the opportunity of talking things through/sharing/being prayed for/burdens borne

b) *Burdens are to be shared*

God does not intend us to grin and bear it - he does not intend us to adopt the heroic John Wayne syndrome, whereby we keep smiling whatever.

No: God intends burdens to be shared with brothers & sisters in the faith..

My mind goes to the Apostle Paul, who at one stage was terribly burdened – he was worried to death over Corinthian church & their reaction to rather severe letter he had written: "**But God, who encourages the downhearted,, encouraged us with the coming of Titus**" (2 Cor 7.6). Titus made the difference

c) *burdens to be shared with one another*

NB Paul doesn't say: burdens to be shared with one of the ministers/deacons - but with "**one another**". Burden-bearing is a task in which we are all involved. Burden-bearing not the prerogative of any special group, but the responsibility of us all.

Let me encourage you therefore to be on the '*qui vive*' to see who in your care-group or home group appears for one reason or another to be going thro a rough time - and to provide whatever might be the appropriate support.

4. TO LOVE IS TO PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

Jas 5.16: **"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed. The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect"**

a) to pray is to love

If you care for a person, you will pray for them. Think back to your own private prayers - for whom do you pray the most? For your loved ones, for your family.

If we love one another, then we will pray for one another - we will pray for those in the family of God - even for the frogs in the fellowship - those "*cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless*" things.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "*A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses*". Wow – that's a thought!

b) pray for healing

The context in which James tells his reader to pray is physical healing.

5.14: **"Are any of you ill? You should call for the church elders, who will pray for them, and rub olive oil on them in the name of the Lord"**

The olive oil is not a symbol of the Holy Spirit – it was a practical medicament. It was the 1st century equivalent of sticking plaster. This verse does not mean that we should pray and turn our backs on medical science, but rather to see prayer as a complementary channel of healing.

c) pray too for healing of relationships

"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed"

Is James simply referring to private sins - sins as it were between us and God? Or does James have in mind sins which affect the fellowship - sins of envy, bitterness, and dissent? I think that it is the latter. Put things right with one another. Even as you are giving one another the peace at communion, put things right – say sorry.

On this Sunday before Valentine's Day, let me encourage you to love one another as Jesus loved us. Let us give practical expression to that love by to greeting one another by name; by encourage one another; by helping to carry one another's burdens, and by praying for one another.

"If you have love for one another" said Jesus, **"everyone will know you are my disciples"** (John 13.35).