

The Church – a community of love

Richard Dawson

Sunday 2 August 2015

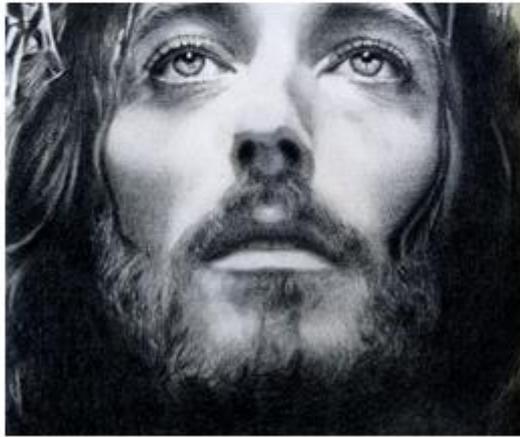
Matt 13:31-32, Ephesians 4¹⁻¹⁶

The great question of the Bible is ‘What are you going to base your life on?’ Will it be your own desires, perhaps your own wisdom, your own abilities? Will it be money and things? Will it be the wanderings of your heart? Will it be devotion to a person who is attractive or who seems to know what they’re doing? What will you base your life on? The Bible challenges us time and time again to think about this because whether we’re aware of it or not we **will all base our life on something.**



The great answer of the Gospel is 'Jesus'

Jesus



I am
The Way
The Truth and
The Life.
No one comes to
the Father except
by Me.

for he says 'I am the Way the Truth and the Life, no one comes to God except by Me.' In other words Jesus says , I am the true basis of life – don't look anywhere else. I am the one from whom you come and to whom you will return. I am the One who will satisfy your heart and enable you to live life to the fullest. I am the One who understands you better than you understand yourself. I am the One who can help you live life to the fullest. I am the one who holds to keys to life – true life! Remember those words of Jesus'...

^{10b}I came that they may have life, **and have it abundantly.** (John 10)

Jesus is in the only game in town, the **life game!** Jesus is all about life but that's so hard for us to comprehend because we are so prone to being short-sighted about life; we are so prone to getting caught up in details and in paths that side track us. In many ways we are like young children. Young children are born short-sighted. When you want them to hold your hand and to cross the road with you they're suddenly interested in the little bit of pink chewing gum in the middle of the road and whether it can be picked up and what it is.



Never mind the cars bearing down on them. Never mind the fact that traffic is coming from both directions they see only what is of immediate interest to them. They are short-sighted! Parents, however, see the big picture. Parents are about life, they see the dangers, the threats, the whole picture. We lose our short-sightedness as we come to understand the reality of our situation, as we come to see the big picture and what is that big picture? It is

that we were made for eternity, we were made for fellowship with God, for love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; we were made to care for Creation, to be stewards of all God has made; to God's chosen ecologists and caretakers – to discover how to care for one another and for all God has made.

Jesus is about life – about the long term picture and for Him this means really long term. Jesus is concerned with life from an **eternal** perspective. This is where life really counts. The words life and eternity don't often go together in this world and in this life but in the life to come eternity is what counts.

The question is how do we base our lives on Jesus and here I believe the answer is twofold for, in the first place, we each must come to a point where we acknowledge personally that Christ is Lord of All Creation and that we wish Him to be our Lord as well. In other words we need to decide that Jesus is who He said He was and respond to Him in the only way we can which is to confess our need of Him.



In the Bible this is called ‘repentance’ and it opens the door of our heart to the Holy Spirit.’ As we confess Jesus so we are saved. But confession is really only the start of a new journey. For we are called to make this journey not as individuals but together in something we now call the Church. The Church is the community of those who have been called to follow Jesus and the Christian life is a communal life – it is meant always to be lived **together**.



The life we call faith is a life lived with other people – real people, ordinary people – people who make mistakes, people who struggle with sin and know they need Christ.



These are not people who are special in any way **except** that they confess Christ together. They aren't the cool people! They aren't the special people! They aren't even the particularly intelligent people but they are **other people**. And that's tremendously important when we come to look at the Church. If Church is about anything it's about living with others, being with others, journeying with other.

John Wesley once famously said this of the Christian faith:

The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social;
no holiness but social holiness.'

Our faith, in other words, requires that we journey together. It is a 'social' faith. **More is learned about Christ by having to walk together than we can ever learn alone.**

Henry Ward Beecher once said that:

"The Church is not a gallery for the better exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones."

So much depends on how we view the Church. If we view it as something that should be perfect or near perfect in itself then we are bound to be disappointed. More than anything else the Church will be a reflection of our own humanity because it is made up of

we who are human. And it is wise to start our study of the Church in this place because we can so easily idolise the Church and forget that for all that it is the Bride of Christ it is also 'us,' we who make up the numbers. So what will this mean? At least 3 things.

1. We should expect firstly that Church will mean that we struggle with others.



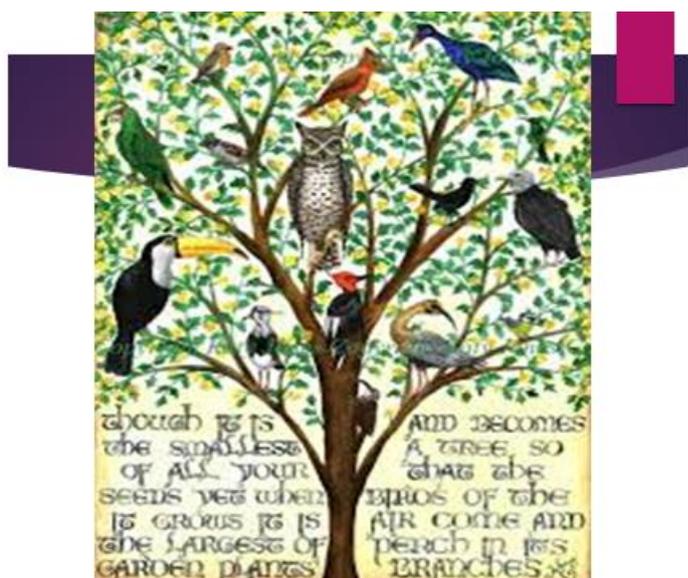
Most of us are used to the idea that the Christian journey will include storms as well as sunny weather. From the parable of the house built on a rock that survives the storm to the incredible battle Peter has with his own weakness in the face of Jesus' persecution and death to the very crucifixion of Jesus we must see that we will never be exempt from storms.

But how many of us understand that a major part of our struggle to walk with Jesus will come as we try to walk with the other people who are also on the journey with us? How many of us realise that perhaps the biggest test of our faith will come as we try to obey Jesus' New Commandment – **that we love one another as He has loved us?**

And yet we are so disappointed when people in the church let us down or don't quite act in the way we think they should. We are so unhappy when others don't come up to our mark. We are so offended when others make mistakes and don't even admit that they've done so.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things about the Church is that it is hardly ever what might be called a 'natural community.' People don't join a church like they would make friends. They don't usually go to Church simply because they get on with someone there. And if they do then pretty quickly they'll discover people there whom they don't get on with. And yet this is the community God places us in and this is where we will learn how to be followers of Christ.

In the reading today from Matthew we are told that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which is small but when sown becomes a tree in which the birds find shelter.



I find here a metaphor of the Church. The mustard seed is that church and when fully grown the birds come a find shelter. We

are those who find shelter in the Church and the first thing to realise about this dynamic is that we choose the Church not because of how well we relate to the other birds who are also sheltering there but because we, like them, are seeking shelter. No one racing for a bomb shelter in the 2nd WW asked people at the door if they felt they could get on with each other. Neither do we attend Church because we are naturally suited to one another. We are committed to Church because there we find shelter. And this will always mean that we'll have to work to relate well to others who are three with us.

2. We should expect that others will struggle with us.

We should expect that others will struggle with us.



It never fails to amaze me that we understand only too well that others are hard to live with and then are completely surprised when we find others struggling with us. But this is the reality of our humanity. We are flawed creatures and those flaws can really annoy other people. Church is secondly a place where we

discover that we are not perfect. Though we may suspect this anyway there's nothing like **real** community and **real** people who are **really** different from us to drive this home. Perhaps the one thing that is harder to do than forgiving someone else is accepting forgiveness from another. It's galling; it's humiliating; it's a challenge to our pride and our ego and, **it is so healthy for us.**

Again we need to ask why this is so important for the Church and the answer must be found in that primary metaphor for the life of the Church which is 'love.' Of all things the Church is meant to be the great sign and symbol of God's love. Paul's great passage on the Church in Ephesians 4 begins with this...

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

How are we to love one another? And by this I am asking – how can we learn to love? I have found time and again that my ability to love is directly related to my own view of myself having been loved and, indeed, **needing to be loved!** In other words, as I have understood how well others have loved me despite myself I have found the ability to love others despite themselves. Humility is the key. True humility opens the door of our hearts to love others because it helps us understand both how precious love is and how important it is for others to be loved.

3. We should expect that the overcoming of this struggle will bring incredible rewards.



So a primary role of the Church is to place us in an environment where we can learn to love and be loved. Do we understand the amazing fruit of this dynamic? If we can become a people who love one another and who are able to receive love we will become leaders in our community. People who can love others effectively will always be leaders in one way or another. More than this, however, we will begin to create here in this community a 'slice of heaven,' a place where the dynamics which rule heaven are reflected in our own life together. And what does this look like. Let me finish with this true story from the L'Arche community in France.



Jean Vanier, a Christian leader who founded L'Arche communities around the world for persons with severe disabilities, tells a story about a 76-year-old woman named Françoise, also known as "mamie." Françoise had serious mental and physical disabilities.



She was blind, bedridden, and incontinent. She could not feed or dress herself. She was unable to communicate through words. And yet the entire staff of this L'Arche community followed the words of Scripture and showed Christ-like love for "mamie."

But showing unconditional love wasn't always easy. One of the staff assistants, a young man called "Louis," was assigned to take care of mamie. Louis was disappointed because he did not feel drawn to her. Faithfully, as he was asked, he fed mamie, but he found it tiresome. Then one day, she placed her hand on his hand and smiled. It was, he said, a special meeting, a moment of transformation, a moment of grace. From that moment on, he

loved being with her. What he had found tiresome and difficult became a blessing. Love had made all the difference. Then one day a woman came to visit the director of that same L 'Arche community. As the visitor watched mamie struggle through life—weak, blind, voiceless, powerless to feed or dress herself—she offhandedly asked the director, "What's the point of keeping Francoise alive?" The director looked at the visitor and said, "Well, madam, because I love her."

The key issue for us as a church is the quality of our love both for one another and, indeed for those around us and the great classroom for this love is... **each other!**