

## *People Are Strange*

Today's reading from Hebrews is a preacher's nightmare. It reads simply like a list of random commandments: welcome strangers, visit prisoners, keep marriage pure, stay out of love with money, and honour your leaders! It reads like a pic n mix collection of impossible commands! What are we to do when we read something like this? First of all, it makes sense to read this within context, because as is sometimes said, a text without a context is a con!

This morning we complete the end of a four week series on the journey of faith. Of course, that does not mean that we have actually arrived as mature, complete and perfect Christians! The very first word in today's reading appears as a command in the present continuous sense: *Go on* loving each other as brothers. Then there is the complementary commandment about welcoming strangers. So those two exhortations belong together, love one another, and welcome the stranger.

The rest of the reading, these other loosely connected commandments, are simply the outworking of those first two, almost thermometers of Christian health. But at the core, what counts is our readiness to love one another, and our capacity to welcome strangers. Only when we have got to grips with these two, do the other exhortations have any meaning.

### **1. Love one another**

So what does it mean to keep on loving one another as brothers? There is a definite reference here to the Christian community: Throughout Hebrews the exhortation has been to encourage one another (3:13), to spur one another on (10:24), not to give up meeting together, but encourage one another (10:25), and here in the last chapter of the book, Christian Jews are reminded to keep on loving one another.

Forgive me for saying this, but I suppose this comes as rather a sharp challenge to a church like Bloomsbury, where most of us do not live together, do not – as a matter of course – undergo hardship with one another. What does it mean to love one another in a congregation like ours? Is there a level of communicating with one another that will forever remain beyond our grasp because we are rather an individual sort of community? Must we settle for some kind of second best? What does it mean to love one another in this kind of community?

Does it simply mean that we model excellence in politeness? Does it mean that we become exemplary in the very best of our inherited customs of relating? Does it mean that we are simply nice to each other, because we can never know one another well enough to move very far below the surface in our relationships, and consequently in our worship? What does it mean to love one another?

In fact, the more I ask that question, the more compelled and the less able I feel to offer an answer! If I were to allow my own very English upbringing to shape my view of love, then the most loving thing would not be to embarrass, upset, or in any way discomfort anyone with whom I am speaking. But maybe the love we are called to model transcends even the very best of the conventions that we have grown up with, the highest and most noble conventions we have inherited.

So what does it mean to keep on loving one another? Well, maybe, we might interpret this as making people feel good about themselves! Maybe it means always having the right word, the gentle touch, maybe even the pastoral visit. But all of these things can be done – I’m not saying they are – but all of these things can be done from a safe distance, that prevents us ever from encountering the real love that is the lifeblood of the body of Christ!

At the most basic level, the literal translation is of brotherly love. There are three brothers in my family. And of course they love one another. But a text without a context is a con. And the context for their mutual love is laughing together, crying together, fighting with each other, hugging each other, tripping each other up, picking each other up. In fact, my latest approach toward inter-spouse conflict resolution, is to remind both parties that they are brothers – and somehow, they feel some inner pride that overcomes their temporary refusal to apologise to one another. I’m not just saying this because it fits the sermon – at present, this really works!

It reminds me of Paul’s injunction to rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Now, I have to say that Paul was really not being very British. He would have made an awful Englishman! There is only one time when hard, English, alpha-male type blokes express their love and emotion for one another. It is when they have had way too much to drink! And I have spent a lot of time around such people when they have been over-exposed to alcohol. But always and invariably, the measure of whether an Englishman has transgressed his alcohol threshold, is whether he puts his arm around another man, and says, “I love you”. “You’re my best mate”. It always, always happens. But there might be something serious tucked behind this observation:

When all inhibitions are gone, why is it that Englishmen will begin to express love, even in some twisted drunken fashion? Well, if university researchers can spend several years telling us why girls like pink, I would love to hear this phenomenon explained. And I suspect it is something like this: that part of being human is to express brotherly love in this way – and if you have a background like mine, something that is basic to your humanity is deemed socially unacceptable. And it takes alcohol to reveal the disparity!

Now families where I grew did not as a matter of course, express love readily among themselves. But, of course, we all knew that we loved each other. We just didn’t express it. Although, in my family this is something we are now learning to do, for the first time. And it is really hard – you have to drag this phrase up from your boots, and it’s painful. But I think this is part of what it means to continue growing in love: it is loving each other in the present continuous tense – keep on loving each other.

Of course we can’t go around with great emotional outpourings to one another on a Sunday morning! Jesus himself was selective about those to whom he made himself vulnerable. But let’s move on to the other dimension of our community relations: our capacity to welcome the stranger, and thereby welcome angels:

## **2. Welcome the Stranger**

Who is the stranger? The stranger is not only someone we don't recognise. Not only an unfamiliar face, or a visitor who we'd like to force into church membership by showing them how nice we are! A stranger is ultimately someone whose very way of being puts a question mark against our own. Someone from beyond our community, who can question our conventions and habits – someone who can see things about us that even those closest to us could not see. They bring an outside perspective on who we are –

That is why they can carry a divine message – that is what can make them an angel – a messenger from God. That they bring to us a word, a feeling, a gift that could come from no one but a stranger. And throughout Scripture, God identifies himself firmly with the stranger – with those who do not belong within the conventions of our community and its practices.

Unfortunately, “we don't like strangers”. I was brought up with memories of 1970s government adverts for kids – Charlie says, “never talk to strangers”. It was to protect us from child abuse – until someone realised that most child abuse is not inflicted by strangers! But I, like many others, was brought up not to trust strangers. My home in the fens is not far from Soham – infamous for the murder of 2 young girls by Ian Huntley. But when local people were interviewed, one throw away line was, “well he wasn't local so we knew he couldn't be trusted...”

To welcome the stranger is to allow them to reshape our inherited practices and assumptions and beliefs. If we cannot allow a human being to do this, what makes us think that we are open enough to allow God to do this? This is why God makes himself at home with the stranger, and why the very human stranger can fulfil the function of an angel.

### **3: Other exhortations / Luke reading**

So the paragraph from Hebrews then moves to remembering prisoners, honouring marriage and respecting leaders. If we are to ask what it means to love one another at Bloomsbury, then perhaps our answers are to be found here. Because this list of exhortations all demand us to step out of ourselves, to remember, to identify ourselves with the other. To make their welfare our welfare. To engage in risk, and vulnerability, and difficulty. But these are precisely the ways in which we offer and receive this love.

At Bloomsbury then, our readiness to move beyond politeness, our capacity to be vulnerable, to pursue committed relationships where we express mutual love to the utmost of our ability, through actions, through words, through the desire to step beyond ourselves. Maybe even  
to go on expressing our love in ways that run counter to our conventions,  
to go on moving beyond the intellectual, theoretical, administrative dimensions of relationship,  
to go on cultivating a context of relationships within which our expressions of love carry weight,

Of course we can rightly or wrongly assent to the belief that we “love each other” but a text without a context is a con. Our context is the body of Christ, a set of

relationships in which Christ is pleased to dwell, a context that thrives on the presence of Christ himself.

The reading from Luke is one that focuses upon humility, that is, upon the readiness to put others above yourself. In just the same way that the reading from Hebrews expects us to step out of ourselves, into the lives of another! And that means abandoning precious securities. And so the reading concludes with the reminder that the only real security is to be found in this Jesus Christ – yesterday and today, the same into all eternity.

Our commitment to this Jesus lies at the heart of who we are, and it is that commitment which we now celebrate with one another in communion.