

Owe nothing but Love

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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“Owe no one anything except to love one another...” That was St. Paul’s advice to the Christians in Rome in the second reading we heard today. That passage was part of a much longer letter, and just before the words we heard, Paul had been telling his hearers to make sure they honoured their obligations. “Pay to all what is due to them,” he’d said, “ – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenues are due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.”

Those words were common sense and wouldn’t have surprised his Roman audience. They knew it was important to honour their obligations – they lived in a world shaped by obligations, a world with a rigid hierarchy, a world where everyone knew their place and mostly kept to it. The Roman society ran on a system called patronage, where more affluent people - the patrons – supported poorer people, known as clients, not employees, but hangers-on of one sort or another, whom the patrons supported. The clients got money from this, but it also gave them friends in high places, which was very important when there was no welfare state and no concept of universal human rights – you needed influential people on your side. But the patrons benefited from this system, too. It gave them status and respect. Every morning, there was a formal ceremony where clients came to greet their patrons – the bigger the crowd who attended you, the more critical and wealthy you were. In return for your support, your clients had to be loyal to you, to vote for you if you stood for public office, for example. This system of obligation was the glue that held society together. Still, it was a fragile glue because it depended on people living up to their promises and playing their part. If a patron decided to drop a client, there was nothing the client could do about it, and if a client got a better offer, the patron might find himself sliding down the social scale. “Pay to all what is due to them,” says Paul, “Owe no one anything,” as the passage we heard began. Roman society wouldn’t work otherwise.

But then Paul goes on, and what he says next takes us into a very different worldview that was, and is, profoundly challenging.

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You can pay all your dues, he is saying, meet all your obligations, fulfil all your contracts, and do what you said you would do, but when you have done all of that, if you want to call yourself a follower of Christ, you will only just have started. It is when obligation finishes, says Paul, that love begins. You may be able to pay people the money or work you owe, but your love can’t be bought or traded. Love isn’t a transaction where “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours”; it isn’t something we can get because we deserve or have earned it. In the Christian understanding, love is a gift without strings, freely given and freely received. If it has lines – conditions – limits – then it isn’t love at all, says Paul.

For Christians, the model for this love is God has a love for us. He loves us, says the Bible, not because of anything we have done to deserve it but simply because he chooses to. It is in his nature to love his children, just as it is in a parent’s nature to love their children. You don’t sit

down and work out how much love you thought it was worth giving them, how much they might repay over their lifetime! You don't open an account and start recording how much love you put in and how much they gave back to give them a final report to settle when they leave home. And though I'm sure there are times when you feel frustrated or cross with them, that doesn't mean you stop caring about them. God loves us like that, says the Bible, but the challenging part of Paul's message is that we are all called to love like that, not just our families, but everyone who needs our help, whether they have anything to give us in return or not. Paul calls us to a whole new way of looking at the world, not in terms of what's in it for us, what we can grab and cling to, but what we can give. He calls us to love, be patient and doesn't give up.

Our Gospel reading tells us the same thing. It doesn't look as if it does at first sight. It seems to be stating the opposite, but bear with me, and I'll explain.

In it, Jesus tells his disciples what to do if someone in their community does something seriously wrong. It is bound to happen – we are all human and flawed, prone to hurting one another. When that happens, says Jesus, first of all, you should try to sort it out face to face, honestly. If that doesn't work, take one or two others with you and try again – they can act as mediators and witnesses. Let the whole community know what's wrong if things still aren't sorted. If that doesn't work, and you can't persuade the person to change their ways, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” That bit sounds unfriendly at first sight because Gentiles – non-Jews – and tax collectors were widely despised in Jesus' world. Respectable Jewish people weren't supposed to associate with them – Gentiles didn't keep the Jewish food laws, so they were unclean, and tax collectors collaborated with the Romans. It sounds as if Jesus is telling people to have nothing to do with those who have hurt or offended them – put them out, ignore them, avoid them.

But there's an irony in Jesus' words here, which perhaps only really becomes clear if we remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. These people – and many other sinners – were the people he went out of his way to spend time with. He was famous for it. He was often criticised for it by the respectable leaders of his society, but that didn't stop him. He healed the child of a Roman soldier – a member of the occupying forces. He made a beeline for Zacchaeus, a tax collector everyone hated, and invited himself into his home and his life; “Today salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house,” he declared to the crowd. They were horrified, but it turned Zacchaeus' life around completely. We don't know who wrote the Gospels, but the one from whom this story comes was ascribed from an early age to Matthew. And who was Matthew? He was a tax collector, called by Jesus to leave his work and follow him.

Jesus' words here aren't an instruction to shun someone who has hurt you or give up on them, but quite the reverse. It is a call to go back to the beginning with them, to remind yourself that this too is a child of God, just as you are, and someone who needs love more than ever.

As I said, it is a whole different worldview from the one we see around us often, but it is the way of Christ. Christian faith isn't about assenting to a bunch of unlikely-sounding theological ideas; it is about love – “By this will all people know you are my followers,” said Jesus in another place.

AMEN