

The problem for too many Christians is that even if they bother taking the tools out of the bag, or learning how to use them, they continue to think they are engaged in a spot of DIY or some personal home improvements, when actually they are co-labourers in the reconstruction of the Cosmos.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...

Friend come up higher. The *whole* of Trinity season might be articulated in that extraordinary invitation from its seventeenth Sunday - the invitation spelled-out by CS Lewis, in the victorious conclusion of the Final Battle - which does not merely invite people to *enter* the heavenly life, but invites those already guests at that consummate banquet, to “come further up, come further in”...

That is why the parable Fr George preached on last week does not sit at the threshold of Trinity, but deep in its inner chambers. And, as we *heard*, why it's attendant warnings: against pride - the puffed up appearance of fullness which belies cavernous emptiness beneath, or against arrogant complacency, which assumes a higher place than it has yet been granted, come, at least liturgically, once we are well along the way towards the perfecting of our nature.

And that is why this week, for the umpteenth time since the season began with the invocation of I John 4, we are reminded, just what this banquet *is* in which we are called to come up higher - *into* which we are called to enter yet more fully: it is the Wedding Feast - union with the Triune God - the deathless life of love itself.

This Sunday, we are invited to consider in the light of last week's lessons and this week's great commandments - where we currently sit in our growing up into this love.

John Wimber used to say there are two questions that we need to ask ourselves repeatedly and without equivocation - First: What business are we in? And second: How's business?

Well, the business of the church, and of each Christian within it, is straightforward:

It is Love.

Love is the literal heart of our faith.

The Law is nothing more or less than love.

The Gospels are unequivocal about love.

The Epistles are obsessed with love.

Love is the greatest commandment, and indeed, according to John, Love is Jesus' *singular* commandment.

Even Christ's most vigorous religious opponents were, at least occasionally, pretty clear about it - ‘love is better than burnt offerings’ says the Scribe in Mark's version of this morning's Gospel. Love, in other words, is not just the summation of the ethical commands of the Covenant, it is the fulfilment of the ritual demands of the Law. And it is not only the mandate and manifesto of God's covenant *people*...

Love is the family business of humankind per se.

It is what we were made *from*, and it is what we were made *for*.

So...how's business?

**Well, I can't speak for you, but as for myself, and for the Church at large, I'd have to say:
Not perfect.**

It may be the case that, 'if you look for it you'll find love actually is all around us'¹. It may be true that almost everyone can, and most of us have, even in fleeting or fragmentary ways, experienced it - and expressed it.

But how many of us, how many even of those who are invited guests of Love's own feast, are actually very good at it?

**And more tellingly in the light of the invitation to come further up and further in:
How many of us, as our lives unfold, are actually getting better at it?**

If love is our family business. And has been for generations. How is it that we still, like the Pharisees in the Gospels - who seemed to be in constant conversation *with* Love incarnate, without being changed one iota *by* him - how is it that we still seem capable of knowing the greatest commandment off by heart, saying it by rote as our Sunday observance, without others knowing it to be written *on* our hearts, by seeing it in their weekday observation of actions and attitudes.

What, exactly, is stopping us from growing up in love?

Well, first of all it is worth emphasising that as our Collect suggests, and our experience makes apparent, there is no *one* reason we aren't better at loving God and our neighbour by now - in fact there are a sufficient number of reasons that the Church saw fit to dedicate 6 months of its year, every year across a Christian life, to rehearsing the prayer and instruction we will need to steadily address them all.

"God is love and he that abideth in love, abideth in God, and God in him" proclaimed that Epistle on the first Sunday of Trinity - as its leitmotif for the whole season. But the need for the various themes of the readings over its 25 or so weeks, illustrates the fact that this "abiding" is like abiding on a tightrope, or for that matter learning to walk for the first time - it is coming to stand in the interplay of numerous, powerful, often contradictory, forces - positive and negative - without collapsing into any of them.

The world, the flesh and the devil are not different words for the same thing - they are different elements among the internal and external forces at work upon us.

And likewise even the twin emphases of Trinity as a whole - both *good* and both *necessary* - need to be understood as forces to be held in tension with one another:

On the one hand the necessary recognition that a life lived in God is the outworking of what has already been achieved by Jesus - that we cannot invite ourselves to the feast or assign ourselves a seat - that this divine life in love is a gift, already ours, through our Baptism into the Easter mysteries, and by the Spirit poured out at Pentecost,

And on the other hand the acknowledgment writ large today that such a life is a continual process of painstakingly kneading that yeast into every corner of our lives, and the humble admission that the process is far from complete.

Because in coming to know the assurance of Jesus' life giving d&r, as we must, we might be tempted to take a higher seat than we have yet been granted - to tell ourselves the sanctifying work of his spirit is finished. But It is not.

¹ Richard Curtis: "Love Actually" (2003)

Just as in seeing with Richard Curtis that love is all around us, we might be tempted to tell ourselves it's work *in us* is done. But it is not.

If we are lucky enough to love at all, or be loved, we might be tempted to assume - for as long as it lasts - that miracle is as good as we can hope for. But it is not.

In just this way the Corinthian church in recognising - which they seem to have done - that they "came behind in no gift" were tempted to think they were already perfect. But they were not.

Paul makes it clear after the opening thanksgiving, that they are still babies, still behaving like mere men, and exhorts them to eagerly desire the greater gifts and the most excellent way.

And so Trinity Season as it heads into the final third of its lessons, wants to make clear to us: for myriad reasons we are still not grown up enough in love. And Love - as hungry as the grave - will not be satisfied with anything less than everything.

But lest we get overwhelmed into further inaction, among the myriad reasons, and the competing forces at work upon us, this morning, I want to focus on just two, two related reasons we're not yet closer to the centre of that target which is the sole aim of our faith, and the final destination of all things.

The first is a failure to adequately consider theory. And the second is a failure to deliberately practice technique.

If we were discussing a lack of progress in a sporting endeavour then not really grasping the rules or the aim of the game, and not really trying to practice the skills it requires might seem like a pretty debilitating pair of shortcomings.

But in the arena of love these may well be the very errors we are most consistently inclined to make.

We don't stop anything like regularly enough to ask what precisely the daily quandaries and quarrels, kindnesses and kisses of our relationships are part of.

And we don't have anything like enough explicit conversation about what to do, to do those things better.

In the first case we have inherited a set of scriptures that admonish the churches constantly to loving action : to speak the truth, to put one another first, to bear one another's burdens, to be generous, hospitable, patient, basically really very nice indeed. And we hear those admonitions as just that. Stop being a selfish fear-driven pride-filled jackass and be nicer. A lot nicer. So we try. Or some of us try. Some of the time. But those instructions are part of a much bigger picture about the aim of the game. They are like telling a football team losing 37-0 at half time to hit the ball on the edge. With your feet. They are correct descriptions of what is needful, but they will not alone teach us what the game is, or how to play it well.

The Epistles, the Sermon on the Mount, the revelation of Sinai, they were never telling us to be nicer, or have a word with ourselves about our tendency to cheat if we don't think anyone will catch us. They are not moral codes. They are part of a fabric of worship - of approach to the source and telos of our being, they are the contours and landmarks of an entire cosmology - of a map intended to lead us home. And learning them by heart from a list will not help us navigate the real slopes and pitfalls of our bodily experience of love, any more than trying to make the new testament description of love our ethical shopping list has helped the church become the embodiment of divine charity.

When the epistles were being written we read of the endless debates in synagogues and sitting rooms about...about what? What were they discussing so animatedly? They weren't discussing the way they should behave towards one another - they were discussing theology cosmology anthropology - they were rewriting their understanding of history and the cosmos and each person's place in it. They were discussing the implications of a man - a flesh and blood human male - being God Himself. Of the Immortal dying. And of dust and bone rising bodily into the heavens. And trying to work out what that meant for the way you say hello to your wife, or deal with the guy whose trying to sue you, or sleep with your sister.

But we have forgotten all that. We don't bother with all that. We don't have those discussions any more. We might rehearse the creed like the words of a song. We might assent to, even liturgically celebrate the doctrinal claims of the faith. But how often do we grapple with them? How often do we ask - "But what does that *mean*?" Or "How can this be?" How often do we struggle with honestly matching the massive claims about bodies and burials and sin and sacrifice with our actual in the moment experience of taxes, and tantrums, and takeaways and television?

Nothing like often enough.

Well. Unless you are just discovering the faith for the first time. Then you are full of those questions and objections and comparisons and speculations. And guess what. Then - at *that* point - however fleetingly - you are as good as many of us ever get to be at putting into practice the principles of love laid out in the epistles and the sermon on the mount. Because in that moment they are not moral instruction they are the product of your burgeoning new sense of the Divine Conspiracy that is history - the outworking of your recently working out that your life - the little things you think and say and do matter on some cosmic scale you could never have imagined.

The best some of us ever get at living a Christlike life is when we first turn to Christ, but it isn't a coincidence that the most engaged most of us ever get with big theological questions is at that same moment in our lives.

And the reasons we stop being engaged with those questions is because - well - either because they start to seem too difficult, too complex, too fluid and profound to be known the way we try to know everything else; or because they become divorced from the how-to-live questions of our ordinary dilemmas and start to run like parallel tracks of belief alongside our actually lived experience, without ever meaningfully intersecting with it; or because we were allowed to think they were simplistic and so we've, hilariously, decided that we already know all we need to know about what the ancients called sacred mysteries.

In any and all those cases - most Christians stop trying to sound the depths of theology - and even most Christian teaching stops trying to guide us deeper into those sanctifying waters - because it wants to get on to the practical stuff about how we should live in relation to one another. But that is a mistake. Because the practical instruction of Moses or Jesus or the Apostles is nothing but the steps of a dance whose music is theology and cosmology and anthropology and whose purpose is not dancing, (*any more than the purpose of any dance is dancing*), but bodily union...with Love itself.

If we want to love at all we need a much fuller sense of just what we are trying to achieve. And we need that sense to be increasingly in the forefront of our minds - to start to recognise day in day out, the cosmic significance of our tiniest gestures of kindness and respect, or the best we can hope for is that some of us might be a tiny bit nicer than we would have been. To people we like. As long as we are not under duress.

But I said we would consider two reasons. And that is just the first. Our tendency to stop focussing on the theory.

The second is like - namely this: the failure to deliberately practice technique. The lack of training in the bodily detail of *how* to love, and the actual practices that develop those skills.

It's all well and good knowing I ought to be kinder, or I'm meant to keep no record of wrongs, but how often do we seek counsel on *how* to do that in the concrete situation of what just happened yesterday afternoon? And how often are we helped to connect the little exercises we have been prescribed, with the outcomes we are actually called to seek?

My daughter has a series of exercises to do every day that involve shuffling along on the floor with her legs and arms straight in front of her. But she is not trying to learn how to move like that, in practicing that movement she is developing her ability to ride horses. And she wants very much to ride horses. So she does her painful boring weird daily exercises, religiously.

And we religious are offered a series of exercises. Fast. Intercede. Give secret charity. Confess your sins. Read the Psalms. Tithes.

But how often is it explained to us why and how *these* things can form us to *love* - in what ways they can sharpen our skills as lovers? How often do we put ourselves in a position where these things can be prescribed for the specifics of our physiology, and our psyche, to address the particulars of our wounds and wished for achievements, the way a physio or a sports coach prescribes exercises to their charges?

We are engaged in one singular task. We are in just one business. And if we are not getting better at it, if we are not getting steadily better at loving God and Neighbour, then amongst the manifold reasons and forces at work, it will be to the degree that we are not sufficiently engaged with learning the theory, internalising the *why*, or practicing the technique, internalising the *how*, of doing both more fully.

And if we want to have come even one inch further up and further in by the time the invitation comes round next year, we might do well to think about how we can add some of either, some way of studying theory, or honing technique, or ideally some of both, into our regular regimes.

At the very least we might want - at this point in the sanctifying process of Incarnation, Incorporation, and Participation which is the Church Year - to ask again with as much honesty as we can muster:

If the business we are in is nothing other than love. How's business?