

Sermon - February 12th 2017 (I Corinthians 3: 1-9 ; Matthew 5: 21-37)

'I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.'

If you remember, Paul is writing to the Christian church in Corinth which he'd founded a few years previously. Obviously at that time they were brand new Christians, babies in the faith and Paul likens the teaching that he gave them then to baby milk. A few years on he'd hoped that they'd have grown spiritually and be ready for rather more meaty teaching. But alas no! He's had reports of quarrellings and in-fightings, of people lining up with particular church leaders rather than being united under the leadership of Christ. This is an indication of the church's immaturity and Paul's clear 'It will not do'. He's now having to go back to basics with them. He wants them to 'grow up'.

When we think of church growth we usually think in numerical terms of 'bottoms on pews' and of course that's what we want to see. But what we learn from Paul is that real growth has to go deeper. Think of a tree starting from a little sapling and growing upwards and spreading outwards. If that was the only growth that was occurring what an unstable thing it would be, liable to crash to the ground with the slightest breath of wind. What keeps it stable is the hidden growth of the roots as they go deeper and deeper into the earth. So healthy church growth is when an increase in numbers is matched by an ever deepening faith and trust in God. This will produce a church which can stand firm through times of challenge and uncertainty.

In today's gospel there's a recurring phrase, I wonder if you noticed. Jesus says ' You have heard it said .. But I say to you' it occurs 4 times and if you were to carry on reading you would find two further examples. In each instance Jesus is referring to basic Old Testament laws which his listeners would have known well such as Do not murder and Do not commit adultery and in effect what he's doing is to raise the bar. '*Okay so you've managed to refrain from killing someone well, now it's time to address that anger problem you've got*' or '*So, you've never actually been unfaithful to your wife well, now it's time to address those fantasies you indulge in about your neighbour's wife*'. In other words there's no room for complacency in the Christian life. As long as we live and breathe there'll be room for further growth as we become more and more Christlike.

Let's think about the bar being raised. An athlete will always strive to beat their personal best. So after a successful jump the high-jumper will ask for the bar to be set higher so that they've a new target to aim at. And they carry on until they reach a height which they can't achieve and that's the real point of growth where the hard work and training kicks in.

It's a bit like that for us.

The Bible's a bit like a training manual which can guide us in our quest to grow in faith and become more Christlike. I'll use myself as an example. If I look at the ten commandments I see that although I've got some way to go with number ten - *You shall not covet* (it is hard never to be envious of others, especially when they share their holiday photos on Facebook)

I think I can pat myself on the back with regard to number six because I'm quite clear on this, I have never murdered anyone.

But then the bar is raised when I read today's gospel. Have I managed to refrain from being angry and insulting? And, you know I might be tempted to be a bit complacent even here because it's not in my nature to get outwardly angry with folk or throw insults around. Time to start polishing my halo? Of course not! It's time to raise the bar again. And who sets the new target? It's our friend Paul in this very same letter to the Corinthians when he talks about love. He says of love (and this always jumps out at me when I hear this passage being read) he says this, 'Love keeps no record of wrongs'.

And you know something – I do. I can think of some specific examples of times when I've been hurt by something that someone has said or done. I would say that I've forgiven them. However I've not forgotten. Whenever that person's name comes up I recall the way they hurt me and I replay the incident in my mind. Thank goodness God is not like this with us. The Psalmist says 'as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us'. In other words when he looks at us he doesn't recall all our failures all the times we got it wrong.' Because God is Love and as Paul says 'Love keeps no record of wrong'. Unlike me!

So in my training programme I've reached a sticking point. The bar seems set too high. Do I give up? No I dig deeper because I want to be able to love others as God loves me.

But you know I can't do this on my own. And the good news is I don't need to.

Think again of the tree. As the roots go deeper so it gains nourishment and sustenance, and the tree flourishes. As we go deeper in prayer and in our reading of the bible as we spend time in God's presence then we will be fed and nourished and our faith will grow and God will work a transformation in us. So I continue to pray that God will help me to love like him.

So how does this speak to us here at St Anne's when many of us feel sad that we are losing our rector, an experience we have in common with our friends at Belhaven Church. Well, the people of Corinth lost their minister after just eighteen months (and he wasn't just any leader but the one who had introduced them to Christ and brought them to faith in the first place) After a short while Apollos took over as their minister. You can imagine the situation '*Oh you know it wasn't like this in Paul's time*' or '*Well, I think Apollos is wonderful. A breath of fresh air.*'

And Paul's response to them is '*Come on, grow up. You're behaving like babies. And you know what, I planted the seed, Apollos watered but it's God who's important here. He 's the one who makes you grow.*'

So with us, we need to be grounded and rooted in God, to draw our strength from Him so that we grow to maturity, so that whoever comes to be our rector finds a church that is fully weaned, on solid food and ready and eager to work with them in serving God here in Dunbar.