

Cell notes from 10.9.17

Love for Introverts!

Bible passage: **Romans 13:8-14**

Questions:

1. How do you react to the finding that over half of the UK's population have 'no religion'?
2. What does Paul mean by calling love the 'fulfilment of the law'?
3. If Jesus asked you 'have you learnt to love?' what would you say?
4. What would prayer and evangelism completely motivated by love look like?

Love for Introverts! Text from sermon:

I wonder if you heard this press release last week from the 2016 British Social Attitudes survey?

"The latest data on religious affiliation... reveals that the proportion of people in Britain who describe themselves as having no religion is at its highest ever level. More than half (53%) of the British public now describe themselves as having "no religion", up from 48% in 2015. The proportion of non-believers has increased gradually since the survey began in 1983, when the proportion saying they had no religion stood at 31%.

"The decline in religious affiliation is hitting the Church of England particularly hard. Just 15% of people in Britain consider themselves Anglican, half the proportion who said this in 2000. The proportion of people describing themselves as Catholic has remained relatively stable – at around 1 in 10 – over the past 30 years. Around 1 in 20 (6%) of people belong to non-Christian religions.

"The fall in religious affiliation has been driven, at least in part, by young people. In 2016, seven in ten (71%) of young people aged 18-24 said they had no religion, up from 62% in 2015. There has been a decline in religious affiliation among all age groups between 2015 and 2016, but among the oldest people, those with no religion are in the minority.

Roger Harding, Head of Public Attitudes at the National Centre for Social Research, said:

"This increase follows the long-term trend of more and more of us not being religious. The differences by age are stark and with so many younger people not having a religion it's hard to see this change abating any time soon. The falls in those belonging to the Church of England are the most notable, but these figures should cause all religious leaders to pause for thought."

How does something like that make you feel? I guess we will have a number of different reactions...

1. Some of us may be **sceptical**, subscribing the dictum, attributed to Disraeli, that there are '*lies, damned lies and statistics!*' In view of recent elections, I agree we should treat all opinion polls with a pinch of salt. So much depends on what question is asked. This survey asked, '*Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?*' That's quite a negative word for many people. Perhaps the result would have been different if people were asked, '*Do you think there is a God?*' or '*Do you consider yourself spiritual?*'
2. It may make some feel **sad or hopeless**. *In spite of all our prayers and efforts to reach out, the tide is still going against us – so what's the point?* If you feel like that, I'd recommend taking a long and wide view. The *long view*, in the OT for instance, shows that God's people had many ups and downs, and public faith in God periodically rises and falls, but none of that derails God's purposes! He's God whether the majority believe in him or not. Nor is he interested in entering popularity contests! The *wide view* shows that while faith may appear to be waning here in the UK, the picture is very different in many parts of the developing world where the churches are growing vigorously.
3. Still others of us may feel **angry**. *How can people be so blind? Don't they realise how much they need God?* Again this is an understandable response – a bit like the anger we feel when a loved one becomes ill or dies. *It's just not right!*
4. Some of us may start to **question** our own faith. *If so many normal, intelligent, well-motivated people don't believe, maybe I've got it wrong!* I address this issue in 'Five Doctrines you Can't Live without', where I talk about those 'doubt attacks' – a bit like a panic attack – when thoughtful, sensitive Christians have sudden moments of thinking, *What if I'm kidding myself? What if the atheists are right after all?* There's a link to it from the home page of our church website and may even be a few copies at the back of church.

So when we hear that over half of our fellow countrymen and women (especially the young) have no religious affiliation, we may react with scepticism, sadness, anger, doubt, or self-criticism... or even a mixture of all of them! But in Romans 13:8, Paul suggests another (and in my view much healthier, more productive) response:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

Love, love, love. Feeling hopeless or angry, beating ourselves up for being rubbish Christians, doubting our own experience of God, or retreating into denial aren't going to help the situation – love will! After all, it is the main thing Jesus commanded us to do: *Love God; love your neighbour as yourself; love one another; love your enemies; love the world; love as I have loved you...* So in a context of increasing secularisation, Christians can either become sullen, angry, judgmental and withdrawn or we can do what Jesus' told us to –

move towards our neighbours and our society in unconditional love. Paul says two striking things about love in this chapter.

1. He calls it a **debt** – in fact, the only debt we ought to owe anyone. I don't really want to get into the whole 'Christians and credit' debate – that would be a whole other sermon! Except to say; I think we have to make a distinction between responsible borrowing and unsupportable credit – otherwise we'd be saying Christians can't even have a mortgage. But we all know the devastating effects of spiralling debt. Paul's metaphor simply means that Christ's imperative to love should be as binding and all-consuming as chronic debt can be. He uses a similar picture in 2 Corinthians where he calls love a *compulsion* – the only compulsion we should be under. He's using 'hyperbole' (over-the-top language) to make a point. Debt and compulsion are extremely negative things. Paul doesn't mean love should be negative or oppressive in any way – just that it should be as powerful a reality in our lives.

2. Secondly, Paul says love is the **fulfilment of the law**. What he means is that if we truly love him and others, we will automatically carry out everything the law requires. St. Augustine made the point strikingly when he said, '*Love God and do as you please*'. We don't get on well with rules, do we? We have a tendency to kick against them. Love is the *better way* Paul advocates in 1 Corinthians 13.

Bill Johnson quotes the illustration of a woman who married an angry and controlling man – a real *male chauvinist pig*, in fact – who, on their wedding day, presented her with a list of his expectations of his wife in terms of domestic services, childcare and so on. Not surprisingly, she was never able to live up to his standards. In fullness of time, this man died (not at her hand!) and she married again. Her second husband couldn't have been more different – he was one of the 'good guys' who respected, loved and served his wife. One day she was clearing out an old chest of drawers and came across the long-forgotten list of rules her first husband had given her. To her amazement, she realized she was doing all of it for her second husband without even thinking, but now she was motivated by love, not law. *Love is the fulfilling of the law.*

I wonder if there are Christian 'rules' we find hard to keep? If I asked us all to write down anonymously three areas of Christian discipleship we struggle with, what would you put? I expect two words would crop up pretty often: *prayer* and *evangelism*. Thinking back to that Social Attitudes survey, we all know how vital it is to pray for our neighbours and our nation. But I guess most of us feel our prayer life is inadequate. Is the answer to try harder... or to love better? If you love someone, you don't have to be told to pray for them – it's a natural response.

It's the same with evangelism. Most of us have a sense of guilt about not sharing our faith with others. But when you love someone, you will find a way to share what is most important to you. There's a place for discipline and effort in the Christian life, but there's an even bigger place for love. Yesterday half a dozen of us went to a Fresh Expressions of Church Conference in Salisbury entitled '*the Shape of the things to come*'. They talked about a roadmap for the missional church of the future. If I were to sum up the day – it was excellent by the way – the message was that *there is no map!* You have to find out what

God is doing in your area, and the people he's called you to reach, and go with it. What it all comes down to is: we have to love people!

Confession time: I often feel secretly envious of outgoing, extrovert personalities. It's always seemed to me that loving others must come more easily if you are a naturally outgoing 'people person'. If only I was more like Jane Palmer! As a rather shy introvert myself, I struggle with loving my neighbour if it means befriending strangers, going to lots of big prayer meetings, or heading out onto the streets evangelising! But love is bigger than personality. It can express itself in many different ways: noisy, quiet; gregarious, private; simple acts of kindness, or big public gestures. God wants to use us *as we are*, *where we are*, not give us a sudden personality transplant!

A man of God had a 'near death experience' and witnessed a scene of people coming before Jesus for judgement. The question he was asking them was: *Did you learn to love?* It's a searching one. Have you? Have I? I've learnt a few things about running churches in over thirty years of ministry, but have I learnt to love like Jesus? I can't remember a time when I've so effectively preached myself into a corner – or issued a challenge which has so completely boomeranged back on me! Have I learnt to love? Do I even want to – considering how costly Jesus' style of love is? But do I have an option, seeing it's the main thing Jesus asks of us? As Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 13, what do any of our lives or ministries or mission mean without love?