

I want to begin this morning reflecting on the topic of unconditional love. A love that is simply given, bestowed on the beloved. A love that still loves in the face of ingratitude, tantrums, hurts. A love that is always open to the future. I would suspect that as we do this we will think of close friends, of partners – we will all think of parental love, and in particular the love of a mother.

This day, Mothering Sunday, is a day of particular thanksgiving. Mothering Sunday speaks not just of maternal love – it was also a day during the season of Lent on which Christians used to return to the Church where they found faith, their ‘Mother church’. For myself it is always a day on which I remember with particular fondness the Parish Church of St Lawrence in Northfield in Birmingham and the people who encouraged me in my early days in the faith.

There are a whole range of expressions that have been used over the years to define what we mean by the word ‘Church’ – Body of Christ, pilgrim people, people of God. There is one definition of Church that I first heard at a diocesan retreat when I was in Mountmellick that chimes in with these thoughts of unconditional love. It is the Church as ‘a community of friends drawn together by the friendship of Jesus.’

What I have always liked about that is that it expresses our understanding of who we are, beginning with a realisation of God’s love for us in Christ. For at the heart of any understanding of the Church must lie the fundamental concept of relationship – a relationship with one another, a relationship with God. This in turn resonates with our second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Colossians and in particular his injunction:

¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

‘Forgive, just as the Lord has forgiven you.’ This is not to be a grudging forgiveness but one freely given, reflecting something of Christ’s love for us. This is brought out in the language Paul uses in the original Greek in which he wrote this passage. There are a number of words in Greek that are translated as ‘forgive’ in our New Testament – each will carry its own particular nuance. There are the words ‘*αφιημι*’ and ‘*απολυω*’, which carry legal overtones, an overturning or remission of a sentence or punishment that is imposed. The word used here is quite different, ‘*χαριζομαι*’, which has the same root as the word *χαιρω*, which has overtones of gladness, of graciousness.

In other words there is a graciousness to the forgiveness that is offered, both God’s forgiveness of us and the forgiveness that we must offer to one another. It is this graciousness that is to be the mark of this community of friends, drawn together by the friendship of Jesus. We are if you like to model in our dealings with one another what we have experienced in our relationship with God. The unstinting love of God, the love that goes the extra mile, that turns the other cheek, that goes to the cross – this is the love that we are called to model in our own lives.

This takes me back to what we were thinking about at the beginning, the whole issue of unconditional love. As we were thinking about that our thoughts turned to the love we experienced in our homes, the love of parent, the love of mother. This all brings home to me the vital role of positive parenting in the life of our

society. So often in our own lives, we model what we experience. Tragically we all too often see this when things go wrong. The abuser all too often has been abused in the past. Those who have witnessed violence in the home, all too often go on to be violent in their own homes. The home is truly the primary school in life, it is the place where attitudes are formed, attitudes to other people, to ourselves, to wider society. It is here we learn the value of tolerance, of integrity, it is here we learn the importance of respect, respect for others, respect for ourselves.

So today we remember with thanks giving the love that we have received in our own homes and families, the lessons of life, the values we were imbued with. We give thanks for the Christian communities within which we were encouraged in the faith, the individuals through whom we saw and experienced Christ. As part of this community of friends, drawn together by the friendship of Jesus, may we be enabled, in the situations God places us in this week, to show something of that reconciling, life enhancing love in the world of today.