

Last week, in the context of our thoughts on Church 21 and Parish Development we were thinking quite a bit about the importance of community and building community within the life of the Parish. This leads to the question of what is the basis of the community we are seeking to build?

Like anyone in my profession, I have a fund of stories that have appealed to me down through the years. This one concerns a young married couple, sitting around the breakfast table, just before Christmas. ‘We’re going to have a miserable Christmas’, the young man complained, ‘I haven’t even enough money to buy you a Christmas present.’ ‘Nor have I,’ said the wife. ‘But let’s suppose you had some money, what would you buy me?’ ‘I see around the town these tortoiseshell combs are all the fashion, Your lovely long red hair would look fabulous, swept up and held in place with one of those.’ His wife laughed with pleasure. ‘But what about you. What would you get me?’ ‘Oh, I would get you a lovely chain for that watch of your father’s that you are so proud of.’ ‘That would be lovely,’ he said, ‘that tatty old strap doesn’t do it justice.’ Then he looked at the watch. ‘Good grief, I’m late.’ He gave his wife a kiss and hurried off to work.

Left to herself she stared sadly at the mirror. How could she get a present? Suddenly she had an idea. She grabbed her coat and went out. Half an hour later she came out of the wig maker’s shop, her hair cut short. She had sold her hair for quite a bit – enough for her present. She went straight to the jewellers and brought the watch chain she knew her husband would like.

Back home she wrapped the present and with curling tongs made her hair as presentable as possible. When hubbie came home he looked at her in shocked horror. ‘Don’t be cross,’ she said, ‘I sold my hair and got you a present.’ he opened the parcel and there was the chain. ‘Come on, let’s put the watch on it.’ She hunted in his pockets for the watch. ‘Where is it?’ ‘I sold it.’ ‘Why?’ ‘To buy you a present.’ He handed her her gift. She opened it to find a beautiful set of tortoiseshell combs.

‘Do you see what we have done?’ he said, ‘You sold your hair to buy a chain for my watch, which I sold to buy combs for your hair, which you sold ...’ They began to laugh at the strange thing that had happened to them. Not that there was much to laugh at. He had lost his precious watch and she had lost her hair.

Although they did not have much in the line of fine food that year, they had a very happy Christmas for they knew that each of them had given up something they treasured to make the other happy. For love to be real it has to go beyond words and show itself in action and sacrifice. To say you love someone means little if those words are not accompanied by actions that demonstrate it.

We have been thinking of the Church as a community. But not just any community – it is a community called to show something of the Christ it worships. We are called to speak of the love of God in Christ, to call people to follow the teaching of Christ and to put their faith in him. That means that our dedication to Christ has to show itself not only in the words we speak but in the whole of life. If we are intolerant of other people, if we are indifferent to injustice in the world, if we show no concern for suffering in the world, what encouragement is that to others to follow Christ? Jesus, in his own ministry, cared for the whole person, body, mind and soul. He healed the sick, he befriended those whom others despised, the leper, the Samaritan, the woman taken in adultery. If we are to tell the world, ‘Jesus loves you.’, then in his name then as members of this community we are seeking to build and foster in this place, we have to show our concern for the weak, the underprivileged, the despised not only in word but in deed.

In a society that claims to be Christian, such as ours, the Church has a right, indeed a duty, to question that society about its attitudes and values. Not that the Church develops a political programme of its own – that is for elected representatives. It is however the role of the Church in its work of witness to the love of Christ to model Christian values and attitudes in its own individual and corporate life.

This is no new concept. In the 19th Century, Christians were to the fore in condemnation of slavery, child labour and working conditions in the factories of Victorian England. There were many who rejected their demands as divorced from reality, even as dangerous, undermining the very fabric of society. In the reign of Elizabeth 1, the then Bishop of London was a continual thorn in her side. She rebuked him on one occasion, ‘Remember, my Lord, who gave you your position – and who can take it from you.’.

The Church, in its vocation to witness to Christ, has always had to be prepared to challenge and to question. for the values that govern society are not always the values of Christ. Jesus came to reconcile men to God and to each other. In our own lives we are called to be agents of reconciliation, spreading in our own lives the spirit of peace and forgiveness that is the mark of Christ himself.

I come back to this whole issues of building community and the nature of this community that we are seeking to build. There must be something of that self forgetting love and concern for each other that is illustrated in that story of the young couple I told at the outset. When people see that the Christ we worship with our lips changes and directs our individual and corporate lives, they too may be encouraged to follow Christ more closely.

‘Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.’ *Matthew 5:16*