

Epiphany 6 Year A

Readings: Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20
Psalm 119: 1 -8
1 Cor. 3: 1 – 9
Matthew 5: 21 – 37

When I think about our readings for today, a common theme that runs through them is about relationships and what makes them so important. As human beings we are relational beings. Although we may be individuals, we cannot live in total isolation all our life. We need community. This is a basic need for us.

A few weeks ago I remember watching a television programme about a man who had to survive on his own on an island for about two (or three) months. He only had a video camera to record his experiences. Of all the difficulties he faced during his time on the island, his greatest challenge was not being able to talk to someone. As a result, the camera became his best friend. Keeping a daily log by talking to the camera was a reminder of where he was from and who his family and friends were that he used to talk to. Therefore, our relationships with others help to form our identity.

For Moses and the people of Israel, the covenant relationship with Yahweh, the Lord their God, was what gave them their identity. It was a relationship that taught them how to behave or live with each other, with God, and with others who were not part of their community. The Torah or commandments or teachings was God's gift to Israel to be the authentic guide as to how life should be lived. The whole of the law could be summed in Moses' declaration in Dt. 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The response of love by Israel to the Lord their God was grounded in the belief of God's own love for them; that God chose them, God

saved them, and that God had promised them land as a home for them. This is what Israel believed distinguished them from other peoples.

Yet the law did not keep Israel isolated from other peoples. In the text from Deuteronomy, Israel, standing at the gateway to the Land of Promise, is confronted with a sharp choice. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Dt. 30:15). It is a choice between following the commandments of the Lord their God, or bowing to the gods worshipped by the Canaanites. At the heart of Moses’ challenge

to his people is the issue of how are they to faithfully live out the heart of the law in light of the new context they will find themselves. “If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today,” says Moses, “by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess” (Dt. 30:16).

Choosing the law, however, means something more than legalism. It means choosing a way of life, a covenantal understanding of social

relationships. This covenantal obedience includes, according to the tradition in Deuteronomy: sharing feasts with the hungry (Dt. 14:27-29); cancelling debts that the poor cannot pay (15:1-11); sharing hospitality with runaway slaves (23:15-16); not charging interest on loans in the covenant community (23:19-20); leaving the residue of harvest for the disadvantaged (24:19-22); and so on. So the love for God is expressed in the love for neighbour. When life is ordered covenantally, there is a well-being among those in the community; there is the “life” and the “blessing” that is promised. Community relations are strengthened and the community as a whole is built up or grows.

One of the real fears for Israel in entering Canaan was the influence of a foreign culture upon them and their covenantal relationship. The reality was that Israel could not live isolated and disengaged from its surroundings. In any cross-cultural engagement, influence occurs both ways. The challenge for Israel was, how do they live out love for God and neighbour among strangers or outsiders? How is the relational and communal spirit of the covenant to be worked out in the new community? More daring a question is, could it eventually include building relationships with those with whom there were differences, ethnically and culturally?

Sadly, the book of Joshua tell us that Israel's influence in Canaan began with a military invasion. It seems that conflict rather than love of God and others was the consequence of their choice. Somehow, choosing life actually meant something other than faithfully living out the heart of the law in covenantal relationships.

The issue about law and relationships was something that Jesus also addressed. From our Gospel lesson in Matthew chapter 5 (vv.21-37), Jesus taught about relationships between people affected by anger, adultery, divorce, and by making false oaths. Jesus' teaching

was not based on abolishing the law for a new law, “You have heard it said...but I tell you” (v.21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34); rather to fulfil the whole law (v.17). For Jesus, this was nothing less than the love of God and neighbour.

What Jesus taught was not about the technicalities of civil law, but a standard that goes beyond the boundaries set by civil law – the standard of love in relationships. In terms of the issue of anger and murder, Jesus doesn't present a position on acceptable violent behaviour, he simply warns against unresolved anger between people and calls for

a concrete act of reconciliation. With regard to adultery and divorce, what is called for is a relationship of wholeness between people. For the case people making oaths, there is a call for bold honesty in the full range of human relationships.

Even when differences exist between people, Jesus' appeal to the law, as Moses did long ago, was to for the well-being of people's relationships, the well-being also of the community. Exercising love of God and love of others would be a way of acknowledging differences, but working through them to create or reaffirm unity. This helps individuals

and community to grow in more ways than one.

I believe this may have been something that the Apostle Paul wanted the church in Corinth to grasp. For a community that considered themselves “spiritual”, they struggled with a divisive spirit. In chapter 2 of Paul’s first letter, we hear of how some had different views about God based on particular traditions of wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6-12). Now in chapter 3, the differences between Christians appear to set them apart into groups giving allegiance to particular leaders. Some say, “I belong to Paul” and others “I belong to

Apollos” (v.4). But for Paul, this behaviour is not a sign of those who claim to be spiritual. In fact he sees it as immature; like the behaviour of infants.

In Paul’s mind, the Christian community is truly spiritual when it lives according to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit that is given by God (2:10-12). So faith in God is not the result of our human understanding and rationale, but a gift from God. Relationships in the community are grounded upon the belief of what God has done for them in Christ. And this is understood as God’s grace, as God’s unmerited love in Christ. For Paul, this is the foundation of Christian unity.

Despite the differences between people, this love in Christ reconciles them to God and each other. It reflects the covenantal relationship of love for God and neighbour, but this time transcends all kinds of boundaries including ethnicity, culture, and language. It even values and connects the different God is served so that all share in what God is doing in the world. “I planted,” says Paul, “Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (v.6). This is how the community grows. This is how it demonstrates the blessing of God. This is the result of choosing life – choosing to love in spite of all that is

different about ourselves because we all belong to God.

Today, we have commissioned and welcomed Jin Sook Kim as our ministry Intern. She is very different from most of us; yet, in Christ, in the love of God, we are with her one people. Together, we are God's community. We have the opportunity to learn together – she to learn from us and us to learn from her. We have the opportunity to learn and grow together in love; love in a covenantal relationship through Christ.

But this relationship cannot purely be confined to within our own familiar community. We cannot live in isolation from others as if stuck on an island all alone with only a video camera or mirror to talk to. We are challenged today, as was Israel of old and the followers of Jesus to faithfully live out this love with others; with those with whom we are different or have differences. The love of God in us encourages us to connect or perhaps reconcile with such people. It encourages us to look beyond the technicalities of issues or problems with the simple desire to show that we genuinely care; even if it means saying “I’m sorry.”

As I said last week, I believe we can grow as a faith community. Our growth is about sharing in what God is doing. So let us serve in whatever way we can, by planting and watering seeds of love in our relationships here and out there. Then watch and, as singer New Zealand Annie Crummer sang, “see what love can do.” Amen.