

Sermon for Sunday 10th September 2023

Garry and I recently watched a film called “Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War, starring Pauline Collins and John Alderton. It was about a lady who had been married to a controlling, bully of a man for 40 years without ever standing up to him. She stayed at home, missing out on all that life could offer, whilst he had a very busy and enjoyable life playing golf, going to cricket matches, a wide circle of friends – until one day he got hit on the head by a fast cricket ball and died. Far from being upset it was an enormous relief to his wife, who promptly cut off all the heads of his prize chrysanthemums, sawed up his golf clubs and took the scissors to his straw hat. Her equally controlling and greedy son promptly decided she’d lost her marbles and put her into a care home where the residents were kept sedated lest they become a bother to the staff. Mrs Caldicot leads a revolt amongst the inmates – not least by refusing to eat cabbage every day – and it all ends happily ever after as she highlights the plight of care home residents on national TV and takes over the running of the care home. She turned her life, and that of her friends, around, by having the courage to speak out.

All too often, when faced with some-one more assertive than themselves, people don’t speak out. They end up being controlled, miserable and resentful, and worse. It’s easier to go along with a bossy person, just for a quiet life. Most people hate conflict, hate having to be assertive. Jesus knows this, he knows how hard it is to speak up, when he tells his disciples how to handle conflict amongst the believers. He tells them to face the person who has wronged them and talk about it – nip it in the bud before resentment and antagonism set in. To Jesus, the most important commandments are to love God, and each other. You can’t easily love some-one else when the relationship has broken down with bad feeling. You can’t do God’s work when you don’t get on with your colleagues. Nowadays we call it being assertive – stating your needs and perceptions calmly and sorting out difficult issues, having the courage to challenge something that you feel is wrong or uncomfortable. It’s not easy – just look at the news every day when we hear about abuse by those with more power than others, whether it be a football manager kissing one of his players or a nation’s leader taking his country to war.

It’s 60 years since Dr Martin Luther King made his famous speech “I have a dream” in front of a quarter of a million people who had marched to Washington to protest about racial discrimination and segregation. It was a powerful speech and well worth reading the whole of it. In it he says” Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a

shameful condition. In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of colour are concerned. “

So far so rousing – but he goes on to say” In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvellous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.”

He had a dream - “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.”

That struggle is still going on in America and across the world– but progress has been made – perhaps more than ever Dr King could have dreamed of. But to achieve that dream for millions of people meant ordinary people speaking out and challenging what was wrong, of challenging the people who were sinning against them, despite the hardships involved.

Jesus himself faced up to what was wrong in the world, and wants his followers to do the same, no matter how hard it is to say to someone face to face, that you disagree. Conflict is hard to handle, but hugely damaging if left unchallenged. It's easier to pretend there isn't problem, or avoid the person, to paper over the cracks. But we've been given a blue print on what to do – firstly, go and see the person (after prayer and with humility) and get their side of the story. There may be truth in what they say which we have to recognise. They may not even realise the effect their words or actions have had. Openness and honesty on both sides can make for reconciliation and a better relationship . But if it doesn't work, and after due thought and prayer, we still think that there is a wrong to be settled, Jesus says take one or two others along as witnesses in case the person involved refuses to see the wrong in what they have done. Sometimes it takes more than one person to present a case well.

But if that doesn't work, then Jesus says take your dispute to the whole church or community – get it out into the open. This will be the third attempt at reconciliation – and if that doesn't work and the person involved in still refuses to accept their behaviour or actions aren't acceptable, then they are to be treated as an outcast. The evil they are doing should be expelled

from the community. That's a big step – one which many churches and clergy find hard to do – but necessary, not only to protect the vulnerable but to send a message to all, that sin and evil actions will not be tolerated.

There's a twist to the tail here – when Jesus says treat them as pagans or corrupt tax collectors, he is talking about the very people he came to save, with whom he spent a lot of time.

Paul backs this up, emphasising in his letter to the Romans that love is the most important thing of all – love does no wrong to others so love fulfils the requirements of God's law. In his time, light and daytime were associated with good, and darkness and nighttime with evil. He urges us all to live in the daylight and live decent lives, loving one another, for all to see – to lead by example.

Sometimes love is difficult – but to truly love someone means not flinching from being open and honest with them and tackling conflict before it destroys all love.

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