

My sermon today is on loving service and completes the set of three as we look at a re-working of our mission statement.

You will all have been familiar with the mission strapline the church has used for some time,

*To live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope.*

It certainly captured my attention when I was looking at the church as a place God might be calling me, but earlier this year it began to dawn on me it was time to re-work and refocus our use of Faith, Hope and Love as a mission statement.

Living Faith  
Joyful Hope  
Loving Service

is the result, and Jane tackled the first, Terry the second and today I am speaking on the third. Rather than something we are to be in the future, living faith, joyful hope and loving service describes what we seek to be now and as we grow in discipleship. It won't be the last time we speak about this, I have the feeling we'll be returning to this again and again.

I think most of us have a fairly clear idea of what loving service looks like, but it can go wrong.

When my father in law was a student at Cambridge, unbeknownst to him his mother made him a dressing gown. She was handy with needle and thread and I've no doubt it would have been beautifully made, and he

probably needed a new one. When she'd finished it she hung it on the back of the bedroom door for him to find when he came home in the vacation, she said nothing.

He didn't notice it. So after a rather strained wait, this gift was pointed out to him and a rather difficult conversation was the result.

Molly thought she was offering loving service by doing something for her son, but Nicholas neither knew about it or was really bothered about having a new dressing gown.

For loving service to be appropriate, it has to be of genuine service to those who are receiving and done with love in such a way that it is about the service that's needed, not the feeling of satisfaction from the person offering the service.

Abraham gets it right.

The little story we had today is just a prelude to more important stories, but it has merit in its own right. The following stories are about Sarah conceiving and the fate of Sodom and they rather take the attention, but this little story is valuable too. Remember Abraham is very important in Judaism as the father of faith and more important (almost) in Islam. His character is held up as exemplary so little stories like this carry weight.

Sitting in the shade of his tent Abraham realizes three travellers have arrived and leaps up to offer hospitality. You will no doubt know that to be hospitable in the east is a strong cultural characteristic.

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Our translation – in fact most translations don't quite get the sense of joy Abraham expresses at the opportunity to be hospitable.

Read Quote....

*(NB – Gordon Wenham's own translation in the "Word" series of commentaries. He concludes..."for this is why you have come, for your servants benefit". Wenham goes onto describe the pleasure Abraham is experiencing at the opportunity to serve)*

He seems to be saying, it to my benefit, it gives me joy to be able to minister to you, to provide for you.

There's nothing wrong with gaining satisfaction and joy from offering loving service (that is after all what my father in laws Mother was hoping to experience!) but it comes from offering a genuine service for the benefit of those who receive and doing so motivated by a giving love rather than a needy selfish love.

It puts the needs of the other person first.  
Recognising that need is the first step of motivation and genuine love seeks to meet that need.  
The satisfaction at serving is a by-product that comes afterwards.

It can and does go wrong.

I've known people who offered their loving service in a rather forceful, demanding and strident way because the motivation was how it made them feel. Because they felt good when serving, their own need to serve outweighed the outcome and it does become service for all the wrong motives.

You can serve others angrily, bitterly, reluctantly, tenaciously and the motivation is all wrong.

When I was a Curate I watched with interest as my training incumbent handled a tricky matter. We had a small daughter church that insisted on being a Book of Common Prayer church (which was perfectly fine, it complimented the other two churches). The warden in charge was a clergyman's widow who had been widowed a long long time and had been warden a very long time. She ran the place like a private fiefdom allowing no-one else any authority or contribution. She was a self appointed martyr to being warden and in truth couldn't let the job go. It wasn't done with love for those she served, but fiercely and defensively because sadly, it was all she had got.

Gently and firmly Jonathan told her, her time of service was over and it was during the difficult, awkward and somewhat painful ending period, he left and went to America leaving me to sort it out!!!

I did do with the capable help of very good church Wardens from the main church and some very genuine competent people took over running this little church.

So we need to guard our motivation.

Jesus own example sets us on the right path. Jesus had had some spectacular success and the disciples had hitched their wagon to his star. Although there was the threat of the authorities, they had seen countless miracles and to cap it all he raised Lazarus from the dead.

The chance for a little fame and glory was there before them and there's plenty of evidence to suggest they rather

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fancied the power and prestige and position that came from serving in Jesus kingdom.

And then Jesus washes their feet.

It was an astonishing revelation.

Having your feet washed was of no more consequence than me taking your coat from you and hanging it in the cloakroom, or making you a cup of tea or taking you home in the car – what was a revelation was that Jesus did it.

Peter in particular didn't want his Jesus, His Messiah, the Christ doing things like that! He wanted Jesus victorious and majestic and all powerful and he wanted to be part of that! In time they came to realize what Jesus had done, how Jesus changed their mind set.

If we want to embody this lesson as a church we too have to learn what it means to humble ourselves and choose to willingly serve others with love, the love God shows to us.

I cannot capture this passage any better than the lyrics of a song

All the room was hushed and still  
And when the bowl was filled  
He stooped to wash their feet  
And when it was complete – he said

This is what I'm asking you to do  
This is why I'm kneeling here beside you.  
This is what I want my church to be  
This is what I want the world to see  
Who it is you follow.

Love each other, one another  
Love each other, in the way that I have loved you.  
Walk together and whatever comes  
Love each other  
In the way that I have loved you.

We shall learn the song together sometime.

Love each other in this way, with humble service. Not something you want to do, but the service that needs doing.

As ever my thoughts are shaped by Brother Lawrence who discovered that every moment could be an opportunity to serve Christ in the loving service of everyday ordinary matters – in his case, in the kitchens of the monastery where he was a lay brother.

If we can, as disciples, tread this pathway, we will get closer to loving service because ultimately everything we do will be purely for the love of God. What might our church and community look like if our actions are all done entirely as an act of love – for God?

(NB - here I led the church in the words of the Methodist Covenant Prayer)

I am no longer my own but yours.  
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,  
exalted for you or brought low for you.  
Let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.  
Amen.