

## Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> April, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 1 John 3:16-24 'The Lifestyle of Love'

One of the best youthwork stories I ever came across was about 25 years ago. Back then I was actually a youth worker – hard to believe, I know, I don't even have any tattoos – but a colleague in a neighbouring parish told me how one autumn he wanted to demonstrate the idea of stewardship with his large youth group. There were about 50 young people in the group and his big idea was that one evening, he turned up to the youth night and basically gave all 50 of them a £10 note. He said: 'I don't want these back – but now you've got £10, use that £10 to help someone else.'

The outpouring of activity and creativity over the next few weeks was amazing. The young people ran all kinds of sponsored events, or used the money to buy raw materials to make stuff which they then sold to raise money for good causes. All in all, the £500 which the youth worker had given to his young people raised well over £5,000 – or more than 10x the original gift.

I love that story. I wish I could try it now except I'd have to explain to a 14-year old what a £10 note was – money is something that only exists on the app on your phone. But it does illustrate one of the basic principles of the Christian life: *pass it on*. Pass it on. Life is gift – and most of what we do as Christians is receive what we've been given and pass it on. Someone shared the beautiful message with you – pass it on. Someone invested their time and energy into you – pass it on. Someone prayed for you when you needed it – pass it on, pray for someone else who needs your prayers. Someone helped you in your time of need – pass it on.

It's the basic message St John gives us today. **Jesus gave himself for you – now we give ourselves to others. Pass it on.** And the particular force of today's passage is the practical side of this. *Jesus showed his love for us in a very practical way. Now we do the same for our sisters and brothers.*

It's a very simple principle, but there's plenty to unpack here. The first thing we have to say is that **there's a link between our capacity to receive and our capacity to give**. The consistent affirmation of the bible is that the only way we don't run out of compassion, we don't get tired of doing good, is that we allow Jesus' love to feed us, to fill our hearts. Jesus' love is not just our salvation, it's our fuel. That's why it's never wasted time to spend time just soaking up the love of Jesus, reflecting on what he did for us, thanking him for his continued presence in our lives. Our energy to love has to come from somewhere – as we allow our hearts to be filled with Jesus' love, so we find grace to love others.

The next thing to say is that St. John is quite specific about the sort of practical love he is talking about here. It is **material help for other Christians**. In the New Testament, the words brother and sister refer only to the Christian community. So let's tackle this head on – isn't John being a bit inward looking? Surely we are to help everyone? Well, let's acknowledge that John isn't saying 'don't help others', but he is giving a clear priority to other Christians, and here's why.

Firstly, the Christians John is writing to are a very small, persecuted minority. Their position in society was such that, if they didn't help each other, no-one else would help them. And, whilst we might not experience that directly ourselves today, there are at least 50 countries around the world where that remains true for Christians living in those countries. If they don't help each other, or if we don't help them, no-one else will. In fact, it's true for some people even here – the welfare state doesn't fix everything. Those of us who are Christians with resources remain the only hope for a lot of our sisters and brothers today.

Second, most of us would agree that our first responsibility is to our family. And as we saw last week, if we come to Christ, we join Jesus' family. Our fellow Christians are not called sisters and brothers for nothing! They are family! So we now have a bigger family to look after – that is both an amazing privilege and an important responsibility at the same time.

Finally, we have to acknowledge that the rest of the world continues to look at the church to see if it practises what it preaches. It's hard for our message to be credible if we allow suffering of any sort, material or otherwise, to persist within our Christian family.

So we pass it on – and especially to our sisters and brothers. It's a simple message, and a very timely one. We're only just starting to see the long-lasting effects of the pandemic, and I want to suggest that those of us who are fortunate enough to find that our financial security has not been affected by the last year are particularly observant as to the needs of our Christian family. As St John says, it starts with *seeing* – we can't help if we don't see.

**So let's recommit ourselves to practical generosity with our sisters and brothers, a concrete expression of the love of Jesus for us all.** This not only blesses them, it also sets our hearts at rest. 'For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.' Let's ask the Lord to show us particular ways we can help – and then let's love with actions and in truth, trusting that 'the one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them.' Amen.

*As we respond today, we're going to sing or listen to a beautiful new song, which reminds us that our whole lives are loving worship – it's called 'So will I'.*