

Acts of the Apostles 10. 44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5. 1-6

John 15. 9-17

*And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.*

The words in John's letter echo Jesus' assurance in Matthew's Gospel: *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. ...* Throughout the scriptures there is an invitation to choose. To choose between life and death, light and dark, seeing and blindness, hearing and deafness, between love and fear. These are all metaphors for perceiving, or not perceiving, the presence of God in our midst.

Jesus offers those who will follow him an invitation to abide in the divine love; to rest in it. This is a love which is characterised by truthfulness. This truthfulness is not about a distinction between telling the truth or telling a big, or a little, lie, but it goes to the heart of existence. This is about existence grounded in the truth.

Through Lent we engaged in a process of truth-telling about the treatment of the indigenous people of Australia. Certainly, this truth-telling is about sweeping the lies about our past out from under the carpet. But importantly this process of truth-telling is also about truth as part of our self-understanding and how we regard ourselves and our own history. Are we the descendants of benign Christian settlers or are there dark parts to our history as a nation? Increasingly we are coming to acknowledge that there are dark parts to our history; to suggest otherwise is to live by a lie and to be deceived about who we are. To live with a lie, at least a denial, about our past is to shape a self-identity based on a lie. In his prayer at the beginning of our order today we were led by the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, who names that we so often use euphemisms to paper over untruths about the real state of things. Maybe the most hideous euphemism in our own time was the description of the genocide that took place in the Balkans in the 90s as ethnic cleansing. Just a regular household task. Genocide – just a bit of cleaning to tidy up the house.

I like to watch *Who Do You Think You Are*. Not because I am particularly interested in the people whose stories are told – although I did love the story of Denise Scott who is in the current series – but the stories of forgetting or denial interest me. So many of these people have big stories in their backgrounds; stories which seem to have been intentionally forgotten. Difficult stories. Magda Szubanski, after her father died discovered that he had been an assassin in the Polish underground during WWII. He had been authorised to kill people – at point-blank range. It seems to me often that when the people featured in the programs uncover the family secret it is as though something settles in them; everything makes sense; disparate bits which previously had made no sense, all of a sudden do make sense. The stories though of course are hard stories and they highlight our human inclination to want to forget that which is difficult. Parents' wartime experiences; tragic family deaths; grinding poverty; lost fortunes; teenage pregnancies; broken family relationships; racial heritage that might have been considered unacceptable and so to be

forgotten – aboriginal, Jewish, coloured. People seem to be frightened to remember and claim these things.

Jesus invites his disciples to abide in his love, the perfect love which casts out fear. So often our unwillingness to attend to the truth is because we fear. But the love of God enables us to see the true nature of things, both light and dark, and to release them into the divine loving hands, that we might rest and be fruitful in the pattern of Jesus.

You know, the church in truth is meant to be a collection of reprobate people, people with iffy pasts, even iffy presents. If we were raised in the church, though, we were in the main told that the church was about being upright, respectable and worthy citizens – this was what it meant to be Christian we were told. Really nothing could be further from the truth of what Jesus' ministry was like. Regularly he was accused of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Do you imagine him spending time with these people with a condescending spirit; or did he like being with these groups of condemned people? Did he love them? Not with an: I'm spending time with you so you can be a nice person; but because he like them, without condition? We know he didn't particularly like being with scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders – their hypocrisy drove him nuts. I imagine he liked being with these people on the margins – because they were honest and rough and were not frightened or ashamed of their identities. And they needed love without condition. So much of what passes as love comes with all sorts of conditions attached.

We talk much about love in the church. Talk about the love of God and are inclined to tell ourselves that our action as church arises out of love. But too easily our human love is misguided. I imagine that the missionaries and churchmen who came to Australia in early missionary waves assured themselves that they were doing what they did out of love. In hindsight this is clearly patently untrue. Misguided and often a perversion of love; certainly of the love of Jesus as he lived.

I'm reading a book by an English theologian William Vanstone called *Loves Endeavour, Love's Expense*. Vanstone explores the nature of human love as he considers the expensive, expansive love shown to us by Jesus. He searches to be able to describe what is authentically love in the pattern of Jesus. So often what is passed off as love is actually quite dysfunctional – and arises out our pathologies – our own brokenness and neediness.

Vanstone writes about how we instinctively sniff out that which is not authentically love. He writes: *the great worth of authentic love makes the affectation of love – that is love which is a pretense or perversion of authentic love – the most damaging and the most resented of all deceptions*. If someone says to you: if you love me you will ... we know that this is a perversion of love. And an abuse of the one to whom it is directed.

Vanstone suggests the power to test the authenticity of love resides in most of us. He describes three ways in which we can test love's authenticity.

Firstly, love which has limits. The church says that God's authentic, unconditional love is without limit. For someone to say to us: if you love me you will ... is to say that my love for you has limits and here is one. Jump over it. The falsity of the love is disclosed. Authentic love is without limit and involves a willingness to self-giving. This is why we mark Mother's Day with a sense of reverence – because the love of mothers is so often out of a giving of self which is without end.

Vanstone describes the second test of love's authenticity as the presence of control. When the one who professes to love needs to be in control then we know this is a travesty of authentic love. This week in the first episode of the series on domestic murder *Look What You Made Me Do* highlights the nature of what is being called coercive control. People enter into "love" relationships to find that they are in partnership with a sociopath; one who tells them they love them but seeks to control every aspect of their lives; and if they can't control, them, they kill them. One woman per week in Australia. And this is nothing to say of other forms of control: psychological, financial, physical and sexual violence. Vanstone suggests that most of us know the perversions of love but what I found shocking in the stories in this week's episode was the number of women who said that for a long time they didn't know the way they were being treated was wrong. They couldn't sniff out this inauthenticity.

The third mark which Vanstone suggests denies the presence of authentic love is a kind of couldn't-care-less detachment from the one we profess to love - a lack of feeling - a lack of being able to be vulnerable to the object of the professed love - a sort of unaffected, self-sufficiency. Love is self-giving and so this means that when we authentically love we will be vulnerable to the other - the joy they cause us and the pain. And ultimately the loss of them from our lives. When we love we give the other power over us - to affect us. Both our care for and our frustration or anger over are signs that we love.

Our need to mourn the death of someone we love is an essential aspect of love. But our society wants to deny us this. Our contemporary need to short-circuit grieving, to be embarrassed about tears of grief in public, to close ourselves off from people who are grieving, to expect that we might get closure after the death of someone close to us is to deny the possibility that if love is authentic then we will be affected and changed by the loss of someone from our lives. This mourning takes time. As love takes time to grow.

Authentic love recognises that ultimately we will need to let go of the one we love, whether it is child or life partner or parent - that authentic love ultimately desires the freedom of the one we love. That in spite of us loving we are also willing to let them go and to suffer the pain of this.

But we are not God, and our love is never perfect - this is part of our creatureliness, a sign of our brokenness and our need for wholeness. Our instinct for authentic love points us toward God; toward the divine love which characterises the love between the Father and the Son: as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. We yearn after this one who is love; the divine one who is our source and our end.

Jesus invites us into the midst of this love that we may be made whole and our joy may be complete. Thanks be to God.

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