

## MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 17 May 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'Praise the Lord his glories show' (CH 152)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'Let all creation dance' (CH 149 – *tune: St John (Haverгал)*)

### Prayer & Lord's Prayer

**Readings** : Isaiah 45:15-19 & John 15:5-17 (*Good News Bible*)

**Hymn** : 'The church is wherever God's people are praising' (CH 522)

### Sermon<sup>1</sup>

Today's sermon will be about love and that reminded me of the days me and my five wee brothers and sisters were attending the Reformed Church in a little village beside an ancient dyke. My father was one of the two ministers and his colleague really loved to preach about love. In Dutch the word is 'liefde', but he would intone it as 'de lie-ie-liefde'. We soon learned that by the end of his sermon he would even expand his voice on that – which for us as children was a clear sign that the end was near. However, one Sunday he kept going and going. Until my youngest brother said, 'Mummy, he's already said it *three* times, but still it's not "Amen".' That was just loud enough for the minister's wife to hear – but she could laugh about it.

So today is about love. Jesus teaches us *a new commandment: to love one another as he loves us*. We may remember the Anita Kerr Singers singing that there is a whole lot of loving going on in the world – after they visited Amsterdam. And in these days inside Amsterdam there truly *was* a lot of love going on indeed. But that is not what I had in mind when I wrote this sermon. This is just to show how complicated the word 'love' has become. What does it mean?

In itself that complicatedness is nothing new. The medieval Dutch – or rather Flemish – word 'minne' has 26 different meanings, ranging from very physical passion to the deepest spiritual experience. Medieval mystics used the word probably just as much as did the singing students in a tavern. Love is a difficult thing. Yes it is. Not just for us, but throughout the centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Used as reference: Gerbern S. Oegema, *De messias in talmoed en midrasj*. Een inleiding in de messiaanse uitleggingen en verwachtingen in de rabbijnse literatuur (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993) / Maria de Groot, *Messiaanse ikonen*. Een vrouwenstudie van het Evangelie naar Johannes (Kampen: Kok, [1988]) – the latter is available from the British Library, but alas! in Dutch

I am sure Jesus is well aware of these complications when he speaks of love. And actually the whole range of meanings, from physical to spiritual, is included in what he teaches. But what is the core of that? Or more precisely: what *could be* the core?

Jesus' teaching on love is embedded in and connected to metaphor and parable. He says, *I am the vine*, and *God is the vine-dresser*, and *you are the branches*. He tells us to connect our lives to him and to each other, as a living thing, like the branches are connected to the vine.

This is not just a religious picture, disconnected from daily life. On the contrary! It reveals the fundamental importance of truly human community. And that surely *is* daily work. *How good it is, how wonderful, to live together in unity* – says the Psalm.<sup>2</sup> Living in community for a couple of years really teaches you how good it is, but moreover how difficult it can be.

The way to connect and to stay connected is to love. Now from living in community we all know that love is not only a living thing, but also a battlefield. Jesus knows. That is why he says that the vine-dresser will remove branches that do not produce fruits. What is the fruit of common life? Shared joy, shared grief, shared interest – but especially joy, unselfish joy. If we do not share our joy, share each other's grief, share our common interests, we place ourselves outwith the community. Fruitless and on our own. Disconnected.

It takes two to tango, as we know. (Don't worry that I will ask any of you to tango – I can't dance.) But simple lines can reveal important messages. We cannot stay connected, to each other, to Jesus, to God, if the communication is not bidirectional. About God we don't need to worry, but about ourselves and each other we should be a bit concerned. It is so incredibly easy to cut off communication. Instead we should really make an effort to keep it open and living.

The name Jesus uses for God – the One who cannot be named – is *Father*. We can have very complicated memories of our own father or from being a father, but in this context God as a Father is related to love, to conversion and to forgiveness. Love, conversion, forgiveness – again a complicated set of words. We need to love each other in order to enable God to love us. We need to convert our lives if we lose that love, in order to enable God's forgiveness to come into our lives.

So, what does love mean? It means that we really need to entrust our lives to each other, trusting and caring. It means that we need to share the joy of that, while at the same time we really need to work on it to make it a fruitful thing. To live is to love, and to love is to live. That is the teaching of Jesus as John has handed it down. And it includes all of our loving skills, from simply falling in love to giving our lives for others.

The greatest love, says Jesus, is to give your life for your friends. However, we know how often and how painfully relationships can break. Almost always there is a good

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 133:1, in the wordings of the *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2005).

reason, even if the reason is burdened by self-interest. People give their lives to each other with the most honest intentions, but real life can overtake them. Yet, if people manage to remain loyal to each other after they broke up, and share responsibility with dignity and fairness, something of their original love, in a strange way, remains. It is, as Jesus says, the fruits that count. Giving your life means a life-long commitment to fight your selfishness and to bear fruits of love. To lose your old life of selfishness and to feed upon the new life of shared love, that is what Jesus asks us to do.

Indeed there is a whole lot of loving going on. On countless different levels. We should judge each of them by the fruits they bear, even if the kind of love is not exactly our own. People can love each other in many different ways and the Creator keeps bringing in a great variety of these ways. If love leads to true community, be it on the level of two people or on the level of a whole parish, the love is good.

In days when somebody's true love can still be questioned in public, simply because it is a different kind than most people know, we should look all the better which fruits we see growing on that love. Because, if we want to know what love is, the only way is to practice it. I sincerely wish that people stay connected in that love, in their personal relations, as neighbourhoods, as congregations and as a national church.

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'Take my life, Lord, let it be' (CH 502) / 'Take this moment' (CH 501)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

God of love,  
we thank you for all the love that surrounds us:  
love from family and friends,  
love from neighbours and strangers.  
We also thank you for the love we can give to them.  
God of life,  
we thank you for all the different ways  
in which you enable us to love each other:  
as caring as a mother,  
as physical as lovers,  
as deep as true faith,  
as joyful and playful as good friends.

God of love and life,  
we pray that we may convert  
from all our unloving ways of life;  
that we may live as forgiven people,  
instead of being unforgiving;  
that we may produce the fruits of joy,  
of good spirit,

of faithful support,  
of honest correction.  
God make us love you,  
ourselves and each other  
as Jesus has always loved us.

In silence we remember those we know  
who need us to remember them.  
*(silence)*

So we pray through Jesus  
who has loved us till the end.  
Amen.

**Closing Hymn** : 'Love divine, all loves excelling' (CH 519)  
**Blessing**