

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> August 2024. Trinity 11 BCP Benefice Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

*“Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.”*

Observing the week’s events in our cities it has seemed that as a society we are very far away from ‘living in love, as imitators of God’. The scale of the hatred and violence has been staggering. When we witness this kind of action the question that resonates is ‘Why?’. What possesses ordinary people to suddenly become vicious and destructive?

Sadly, it is not a new thing. Human history is a catalogue of hate and destruction. The Church has not been immune to this. Indeed, sometimes the worst hatred inflicted on others is perpetrated by those who call themselves followers of a God of Love. You need look no further than how our lord was treated on his entry into Jerusalem when the crowd that had proclaimed Him as Son of David only a few hours later became a mob and shouted for him to be crucified.

Similarly, today in the Epistle, the picture is of a community that is having difficulty holding together. It is a community at risk, in which things are being said that are hurtful and in which members are failing to recognize the bond that unites them in Christ. Sounds familiar? It happens. Believe me, I know! This week the Diocese appointed two new bishops and I have heard criticism of them before they have even commenced their roles!

Indeed, we can all hold up our hands as being guilty of this. The reality is that none of us are very far away from the same hatred and malice we saw in those mobs at the beginning of the week. But you don’t have to be part of a mob to speak with venom and malice about others. It often just starts with a negative mindset, focusing only on

problems, missing the wider brighter picture, and complaining. Jesus says in the Gospel today, 'Do not complain among yourselves'. It seems this is the default position of people, and we focus on what we think is wrong, missing or lacking, and we struggle to find an alternative. Yet we have an alternative, and we claim to worship and follow Him. The key is to be willing to change and be changed.

In St Paul's letter, he spells out this alternative at the end of the passage today, 'Live in love as Christ loved us' he says. But it is interesting how quickly we often rush to the first part about speaking the truth. We assume that we are being instructed to set our neighbour straight, that we know the right thing and our responsibility is to correct the other person. But, before we hurry to proclaiming the truth, we need to hear the whole verse that firstly we are told to "*put away falsehood.*" This means, before we ever dare speak a word to anyone, we need to search our own hearts deeply and honestly, to start by examining our own lives and whether we speak with humility and love.

Where does that start? With kindness. Kindness is a basic way for us to imitate God. Because God is full of kindness which comes from His heart which is only Love.

As Mother Teresa said, "*Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.*"

Yet too often kindness is offered and rejected, scorned, goes unrecognised and unappreciated. Put away bitterness, St Paul tells us, together with all malice, and be kind to one another. Today that means, be kind on social media, be kind on the roads, in stores and restaurants, at church, at home, with our families, even kind to your vicar! Be kind, endlessly. It all starts there, and it all ends there.

Speak the truth in love St Paul says, do not ‘grieve the Holy Spirit’, and “*let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*” So, what is evil talk? The word that Paul uses literally means rotten or putrid, like food that has gone bad. That’s the kind of talk that Paul wants us to put away, words that need to be thrown away before they hurt someone. Complaining, criticising, gossiping, doesn’t build others up, and undermines community. It is how Satan tries to destroy community and it is what we have seen this week when the anger escalates into violence. How do we stop this? It begins with each of us and how we speak and think and act. We are to, “*Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.*”

I will finish with some words from a prayer ascribed to St Patrick, known as ‘The Breastplate’ or the ‘Cry of the Deer’, words that we can pray with humility to help us live in love, “*Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me.*”

Thanks be to God. Amen.