

Sermon 20th May 2017 Acts 17: 22-31, 1Peter 3: 13-22 and John 14:15-21.

We all like to think we know God. We read about him in the bible, we pray to him and he blesses us with his holy spirit. He sent his only son to save us from our sins as long as we are willing to repent of our wrong doings. God loves us as long as we obey his commands and here in lies the problem. Some people use these words to oppress others and this can happen to both young people as well as adults. The words if you love me can be used in such a way that people end up acting in ways that they previously would not. If you watch Coronation Street you will know what I mean. At the present time there is a storyline where a young vulnerable girl is being encouraged to sleep with men; for what purpose? Simply because these men like sleeping with young underage girls. The girls boyfriend has plied her with false affection and gifts, she perceives this as love and doesn't want to upset her boyfriend. When he first wants her to sleep with other men she is reluctant, but eventually goes along with his wishes. The next scene shows us how guilty and dirty this has made her feel, when she expresses this to her boyfriend, his reaction is both stunning and shocking. Instead of offering support he gets angry and tells her she doesn't love him like he loves her, if this is the way she feels. There is no concern for her or her feelings, just an attitude that she doesn't love him and how hurt he feels. The story line then continues and the young girl gives in under influence from another female who tells her that she needs to show her boyfriend how much he means to her by obeying him. The young girl fearful of losing the boyfriends love continues to sleep with other men. Because she does this the so called boyfriend professes deep undying love and proposes marriage. I cannot tell you how this ends, because I don't watch the show and I haven't seen the friend that does for a while. The point is that though this is a work of television fiction it is based on reality. The reality is very real for young girls not just living abroad but here in this country. I am not just talking about girls either there are plenty of young boys who are also used in this way. There are no statistics that show what the percentage of children is who are groomed because most of them are too ashamed to report it. This abuse doesn't just happen in childhood there are many adult men and women who also suffer in this way. Domestic violence in adult relationships is prevalent in all walks of life. 1 in 4 women are abused at some point in their adult lives and 1 in 6 men suffer at the hands of abusive partners. Abuse is a form of power and usually the abusive partner is lacking in self esteem, it makes them feel better to be in control. For some abusers it is sadly a repetition of what they suffered at the hands of their own abusers. Whatever the reason for being an abuser, when they say to someone that they don't love them if they don't do as they say is totally and utterly wrong.

Our gospel reading today begins with the same language that of the correlation between love and obedience. What worries me most about the language we sometimes hear read out from bible passages is that there are some people who truly believe that they have the right to expect complete and utter obedience from their partners and children. It is not just in christianity but in many other faiths as well, that these words are used to keep people in their place. Nothing to do with us you probably think, but actually yes it does have something to do with us. The words we hear today are being misrepresented. The God of the new testament is a loving God. Yes he is asking us to be obedient, but not in a way that will cause us physical or mental harm. God is not saying that if we don't love and obey him he will withdraw his love from us. What God is asking

is that we enter into a relationship with him, a reciprocal relationship. One that is based on mutual love and respect. If we choose not to follow the gospel and love one another in a caring and gentle way, then God is not going to become abusive towards us, he will wait, wait patiently for us to return to him. The reward that we will receive for being loving and obedient children of our heavenly father is the gift of eternal life. This is the message of obedience and love that we should be spreading, not one of fear and abuse.

Verse 15 of the reading from Peter tells us we should always have an answer ready to give to those who enquire of our hope. This is why it is important that we don't just read or listen to scripture being read. We need to question what the passages mean for us as we live out our lives in this time and place in history. What was acceptable years ago is no longer acceptable now, what is acceptable now will not be acceptable in the future. We are called to proclaim the gospel for this generation, to preach and live out a gospel of love and obedience, for all people in all places; for the many and not just the few. To keep God's kingdom alive and meaningful, we have to show people that all are welcome, that we offer forgiveness to those who make mistakes and that we will never stop being a loving community. When we hurt and when we fall out with each other we have to be repentant and learn how to forgive, if we can't do that with those who worship in this community how can we expect to bring others to God. We are washed clean by our baptism, we begin a new life in Christ when this happens, we hurt God and are not being obedient to him or loving him when we fall out with others. When we preach the gospel of love and obedience let us begin with those whom are part of this community as well as those who are yet to come.

Amen