**The Discipline of Generosity**

Continuing our series on Spiritual disciplines I am here to encourage you in the spirit of generosity. Or, more precisely, the generosity of love.

It’s generally accepted that there are three theological values - Faith, Hope and Love. Paul classes Love as the most important of these three values and interestingly, depending on the translation of your bible, it is sometimes referred to as Charity.

Now when I use the term Love, I am not meaning the emotion or infatuation you see often played out in TV programmes, I mean Love in the Christian sense – the love we are expected to develop towards each other when told in Mark12:31 to “Love your neighbour as yourself.”. This is often referred to using its Greek name of ‘agape’. We have a prime example of this through Jesus’s actions within our Mark reading - Jesus and the disciples had been working non-stop: we’re told they had not even been able to eat (Mark 6:34), so they slipped away on a boat to rest and recharge, but the crowd followed them. Jesus, seeing the multitude had followed, took compassion on them, and continued His teaching. This generous compassion was born out of love for His people. Had continued our reading, we would have read the story of the feeding of the 5,000. In this story Jesus realised that it was late and the people, like himself and the disciples, had not eaten. So, in a simple act of generosity, he provided a meal for everyone (Mark 6:35-44).

Bread and generosity often go hand and hand in the Bible. In Exodus, we see God’s generosity to the people of Israel providing them manna and quails as they wondered around the desert (Exodus 16). Elijah, when running for his life from Jezebel, was provided with bread by an angel (1 Kings 19:3-6). A little earlier God sent ravens to feed Elijah bread and meat (1 Kings 17:2-6), and then led him to a widow who found her last flour did not run out while she looked after him (1 Kings 17:7-16).

Some people think that God in the Old Testament is an angry God… but He is a generous God, and we can see that throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Never more so than when sending His only Son, who continued to demonstrate His generosity, eventually going to the cross for our sins – the act so generous in love, that we celebrate it in the Eucharist, Holy Communion.

Generosity is recognised by anthropologists as a universal human behaviour - since we are created by God, should this be a surprise? But as Christians, we are called to more. We know we are called to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:39) but what does this mean? It is important to note that loving your neighbour does not mean liking your neighbour. Just as we like some foods and dislike others it is naturally the same with people. There are some people we just struggle to get along with and this is neither a sin nor virtue – it is just a fact. Of course, how we act on those struggles is a whole other matter. The rule for us then is perfectly simple – do not waste time worrying about liking our neighbours, simply love them whether you like them or not. I know this can sometimes be hard and would add a caveat here that if loving a person is becoming detrimental to our own health, then we may have to back off – that is ok.

The early church also needed to work out how to live their lives demonstrating generosity, and throughout the New Testament we get glimpses of how they did this - none more so than in the book of Acts (Acts2:42-47). There we are told that the early Christians sold property and possessions to everyone who had a need. Now I am not asking you to go and sell your homes - the early Christians were meeting in each other’s houses so obviously they did not sell all their property, but they did choose to live as a single family. When you live as a family under one roof you don’t see this chair, this table, this bottle of milk or loaf of bread as ‘mine’ rather than ‘yours’. The breadwinners in the household don’t see the money they bring in as theirs specifically, rather it belongs to the household. That’s what the early church did. This was modelled on Jesus’ and the apostles’ own lifestyle, where there was a common purse which was contributed to and shared between Jesus, the twelve, and the larger company of family and friends – behaving like a single family.

We are also a family - the family of God - and we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ. As such we are called to love one another, which will naturally mean being generous towards each other. Now we may not live together in one house and have a common purse, but we do have parish responsibilities: we have a parish share we must pay the diocese; we are guardians of two churches and halls which will be passed down to future parishioners. But we must also be generous in sharing our gifts and resources with other members of the parish.

We also have individual responsibilities to each other, for example helping each other out when needed. This could be shopping for someone who has had the dreaded ‘ping’ and been told to self-isolate by the COVID App. Or it could be cheering someone up who’s having a bad day.

This is all agape and we are all called to live it. So, the next time you eat a piece of bread – remember God’s generosity to us and ask Him the best way you can be generous to others.

**Hannah Robinson.**