**Holy habits - Service: Week 5**

Last week Debs Barnett helpfully reminded us of the Parable of the Good Samaritan where Jesus made it absolutely clear who are the neighbours whom we must love and serve. Jesus was equally clear in the Sermon on the Mount: *You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that! (Matthew 5 verses 43-47).*

It is very easy to speak to our friends and help them and love them. It is much harder to speak to strangers and help them and love them. And for most of us it is near-impossible to speak to enemies and help them and love them. But that is exactly what Jesus is commanding us to do. You often hear people saying how much they love the Sermon on the Mount. I find it so challenging all the way through that it is very hard to love something that reminds me so often of my failings. But thanks be to God that Jesus died on the Cross so that I am forgiven for my failings, and I can live with myself.

Although the teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount is for each one of us individually, I think it should also apply equally to us as a society, especially if we wish to call ourselves a Christian country. Because I am getting old, the country I grew up in was predominantly uniform in culture and appearance, with social class being the major difference between people. But the United Kingdom has changed considerably during my lifetime, and we are now multicultural in all sorts of ways, and all the better for it in my opinion. I enjoy the huge variety of cuisines now available, I enjoy meeting people whose birth language is not English (like me), I enjoy the way our sport and our arts and our society is much more varied and interesting. Our church at Bents Green is greatly enriched by people whose heritage is international.

I watched a recent interview with the West Indian cricket commentator and former fast bowler Michael Holding. He was explaining that in this country and most Western countries, it goes without saying that white lives matter. We automatically get upset when white people are accidentally or deliberately killed. Most of us get equally upset when black people (or people of whatever race) are accidentally or deliberately killed. But there are some people in this country and other Western countries who do not get upset when that happens. I think Michael Holding is right. Some people put it down to knife culture or gang culture or some other factor that reduces the degree of upset they feel.

Tim Crome recently referred to some interviews in Connexion magazine with 5 black people including Ministers who have grown up in the British Methodist Church. They do not feel that they have been treated equally to white people. Often it is patronising or stereotyping rather than direct prejudice or dislike, but that difference between the treatment of people of different races and backgrounds has existed and undoubtedly still exists in the church.

This is wrong. *Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!* For Jesus, it is not only people we like and who both like us and also are like us, our friends, that we love and value and help and serve. If that is all we do, He calls us pagans, not Christians. We must love and help and serve everyone, no matter where they are from, no matter how they look. That is surely simple, compared with loving our enemies.

More on this vitally important topic next week.

*Produced by Glenn Evans on behalf of the Bents Green Holy Habits Planning Group (Debs Barnett, Glenn Evans, Martyn Read, Graham Wassell, Daphne and John Wilkins).  All quotations from the Good News Translation. You can find more information on the Circuit Holy Habits Programme on the Sheffield Methodist Circuit website and also the Sheffield Methodist Circuit Facebook page.*