

Jesus and his disciples were criticised for many things, but never for being too holy. In fact quite the reverse. The religious authorities were outraged because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he and his disciples did not adhere strictly to the food laws, and they ate with all kinds of dubious characters. When Jesus taught, he used stories from everyday life – lost coins, finding a pearl, farming and baking. These seem very human things.

Yet, Jesus reprimands Peter.

‘you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’

What are divine things? For that matter, what are human things?

It is the difference between self-interest and God-interest. Jesus is not advocating that we should not be interested in people, or care about the state of the world in which we live. He is concerned about our motives. Human things, in this context, are all based upon our image and self-preservation. ‘What will people think of me?’ ‘How will I survive this?’ Similarly keeping our minds on divine things does not mean that we have to distance ourselves from this world and spend all our time in meditation and prayer. The divine things are all to do with God’s will, his requirement that we love Him and love each other. The question then is not ‘What will people think of me, or of him’, but ‘how will this further reconciliation’ and ‘how will this help people to learn about love’.

Stated like that it sounds simple, but in practice of course it isn’t. For setting our minds on divine things requires strength, otherwise we risk simply becoming passive, allowing life to toss us where it will, imagining that by allowing ourselves to be victims we are in some way following Christ. Imagine it is a cold day, and some poor man has his coat stolen from him. Dejected and appalled by human behaviour he feels victimised (and cold). He is sorry for himself, and the temptation, if he is a Christian, is to see his misfortune as a kind of martyrdom, but sadly, misfortune does not necessarily make us holy or better people. On this same cold day, another man sees someone walking towards him shivering, with ragged clothes and

without a coat and in a moment of generosity he offers him his. It is accepted. By taking the initiative, by thinking about the other person's wellbeing, he has ended up in the same place as the victim of theft, freezing cold! However, their situations are vastly different. The latter has given the recipient the opportunity to learn something about love. Rather than being weakened by this encounter, he has become spiritually stronger.

Jesus warns the disciples of the sacrifices they will have to make if they too are to give people the opportunity to learn about love. At this stage they cannot possibly understand what is involved. Jesus knows that he has to make this journey, and he knows too what the consequences will be. But he is not a victim, he does this out of generosity, because it is the ultimate way in which humanity can be taught about love. This was not weakness, it was spiritual strength, because it was his freely given offering of love.

Paul, in writing to the church in Rome, is a lesson in how this alignment with God's will might work itself out in practice. It is a challenging list, and the first phrase sets the scene.

Let love be genuine.

Most of us have at some stage been greeted by someone with a hug and a peck on the cheek that is totally without warmth, where you know they don't really want to see you and are looking over your shoulder for someone more interesting. It isn't genuine. And most of us have among our acquaintances people that we don't particularly like and would rather avoid and probably, when we greet them, they can detect our coolness. How can our love for them become genuine? Because if we are to set our mind on divine things, then we are required to love everyone, as God loves everyone.

We can only love what we know and understand and that requires time and commitment. If we understand that someone has been deeply hurt and feels very vulnerable, we will be able to be forgiving when they withdraw and appear cold. If we know that someone is very stressed and worried we will at least try to forgive them when they snap at us. None of us is perfect. When we make time to get to know people and, conversely, allow them to get close to us, love can become genuine. We become stronger, and from that position of strength we can be forgiving

and compassionate. As we know with our own families, love does not mean that there will never be quarrels, or frustrations, but it does mean that there will be warmth and openness. Genuine love means thinking about the other person.

It does not mean being a doormat. Loving someone can involve challenge their behaviour, it can mean leaving an abusive relationship. God does not require us to become victims.

God does require us to be genuine, not just in our dealings with each other but with Him, and with ourselves. If we are to set our minds on divine things, we need to, as far as is humanly possible, understand God's will. We do this through learning about Christ, his teaching and the way in which he lived and died, and we do it through prayer, through the Holy Spirit. This contact and understanding makes us stronger, and from that position of spiritual strength we can become generous and caring.

Yet there is still one enormous hurdle to get over before we can truly set our mind on things divine. We have to be genuine with ourselves, we have to be able to see and recognise our own weaknesses and failings and find ways of associating with others who will compensate, with whom by working together we can create a real strength. If we pretend we have no weaknesses we will always be tripping up, or worse, tripping up other people. If we acknowledge our weakness without attempting to dealing with it, we will constantly be a prey to despair.

When our love is genuine, when we truly know our limitations and long to care for others and to do God's will, then, and only then, will we be strong enough to take up our cross and follow Christ. And it is the final words of the epistle today that show us the weight of that cross. 'Do not be overcome by evil, overcome evil with good'.

Christ will not thrust a cross upon us to crush us. But he does ask that we willingly and knowingly take up the cross, the cost of providing the opportunity for others to learn about God's love, the cost of setting our mind on divine things. Amen.