**SERMON FOR EASTER 6 | 09.05.2021**

**Acts 10: 44-end; 1 John 5: 1-6; St John 15: 9-17**

***As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,* says Jesus at the beginning of today’s Gospel.**

**This coming Saturday, for the first time for over eighteen months we are finally able to celebrate a wedding in Church! As Dom and Annabel exchange their vows here at St James’, there will be a real sense of relief, excitement and joy – but also a little sadness.**

**They were due to be married in Australia in front of their parents, families and friends just as the pandemic broke, this time last year. For a whole host of reasons it simply hasn’t been possible to get back home to celebrate their love and commitment to one another so there will be just twelve close friends with them here in London and the webcams will never be more vital as the 300 or so people they hoped to invite to their special day, watch the streamed event back home – at 10.30pm in the evening! God-willing, they will have another party back in Brisbane sometime later in the year but in the meantime we look forward to providing them with the opportunity to exchange their vows here in Church, sharing their happiness - albeit via our webcams. It hasn’t been easy for them but, far from home, their love for one another has helped them to make the best of what has often seemed like a bad job.**

**But perhaps that reminds us how we often receive love: in circumstances which may be far from ideal. *This is my commandment,* Jesus continues, *no one has greater love than this to lay down one’s life for one’s friends…***

**When I was thinking over how I wanted to present today’s sermon, I reflected that perhaps I don’t tell enough stories, stories of real people. So I want to share a few stories of love with you now. They were collected by Marc Chernoff, a psychologist who has reflected for a lifetime on the nature of love in adversity. So here are four snippets from the stories he has collected from former clients:**

My dad lost both his eyes when he was in his early 30’s to a rare form of cancer.  Despite this, he raised my sister and I, and took care of our mother who was in and out of rehab for alcoholism. She is fully recovered now; my sister and I both got our degrees and my parents are together again. I’m certain none of this would have been possible if my dad hadn’t been such a resilient, positive force in our lives.  He literally loved us back into being a family again.

The happiest moment of my life is still that split-second a year ago when, as I lay crushed under a car weighing over a ton, I realised that my husband and nine-year-old son were out of the vehicle and absolutely okay.

Yesterday, after completing eight months of treatment for depression in a secure psychiatric unit, I spent my first day out with my five-year-old daughter.  All day we sat in my parent’s house making paper collages. The sight and sound of my daughter’s laughter and the simple pleasures of cutting up bits of coloured paper and peeling Copydex off our fingers are the best reminders I’ve had in eight months of what love really feels like.

Last night, on Christmas Eve, there was a family of six staying at our hotel.  They were hanging out in the lobby by the fireplace sharing stories and laughing. I asked them where they were from.  ‘Oh, we’re from here,’ the father said. ‘Our house burned down yesterday, but miraculously, all of us got out safely.  And that makes this a very merry Christmas’.

**Marc Chernoff goes on: *These stories obviously hold many lessons, but one lesson they collectively share is the fact that hard times don’t necessarily break a person, they can also make a person.***

***Hard times are like strong storms that blow against your body and mind. It’s not just that these storms hold you back from places you might otherwise go.  They also tear you away from all but the essential parts of you that cannot be torn, so that afterward you see yourself as you really are in the present, without the familiar attachments and crutches you’ve been clinging to.***

***In a very real sense, you are here to endure these storms, to risk your heart . . . to be bruised by life.  And when it happens that you are hurt, or betrayed, or rejected, let yourself sit quietly with your eyes closed and remember all the good times you had, and all the sweetness you tasted, and everything you learned. Tell yourself how amazing the journey has been, and then remind yourself that pain is a necessary part of it all.***

***In all seasons of life, your goal shouldn’t be to seek a perfect and pain-free existence, but to live an imperfect and sometimes painful one in radical amazement.  To get up every morning and take a good look around in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is extraordinary in its own right.  Every day is a gift.  Never treat life casually.  To be spiritual is to be amazed – and grateful - even when things don’t go your way.***

**Now sermons are not exercises from some glossy self-help book off the shelves of Waterstones but I could not but feel the deep Christian resonances that flowed from the reflections of this very Jewish psychologist! Like Chernoff, Jesus, as revealed to us by St John, is not offering us a lovey-dovey saccharine saturated guide to our relationships where we love only when things are going well.**

**Instead he shares the deep wisdom that we can only become fully rounded and happy people in as much as we are willing to work through the tests and challenges of this life with a love that does not allow itself to be swamped by the difficulties – or the sheer bad luck that can sometimes come our way.**

**So Dom and Annabel have chosen this version of 1 Corinthians for their wedding, a paraphrase of the familiar words of 1 Corinthians 13:  *If I had the gift of being able to speak many languages without ever learning them first, in fact if I could speak every language there is - but didn’t love the people I was speaking to - it would be nothing more than the sound of crashing drums or tinkling cymbals! If I had the gift to prophecy and could see at a glance what was going to happen in the future; if I knew everything about everything, but didn’t love the people I was talking to, what good would it do me? Even if I had enough faith to be able to tell the mountains to move, it would still be pointless unless I did it with love. If I gave everything I had to the poor, if I let myself be burned alive for preaching the Gospel, but didn’t love others, it would be absolutely no use at all.***

***For love is patient, love is kind - never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty, selfish or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges and will barely notice when others do wrong. It is never glad about injustice but is glad whenever truth wins out. And if you love someone you will be loyal to them no matter what the cost. You will always believe in them, always expect the best of them and always stand your ground in defending them.***

**As we prepare in the coming couple of weeks to welcome Baptism and First Communion candidates, may we share with them our experience that – whatever comes our way – our love for one another can cope with the ups and down of our lives (however shakily at times!) because we follow Christ who willingly laid down his life for us – and was still willing to call us not just friends but the ones he loves.**

***As the Father has loved me, so I love you.***