

SERMON

Romans 12:9-13

Serve the Lord, Love One Another and Carry out his Mission

Waverley, 4-12-22

Let love be sincere. Hate evil; cling to what is good. With brotherly and sisterly love, tenderly love one another, putting others before yourselves, treating them with honour, doing this eagerly and not lagging behind. With a spirit on fire, serve the Lord, rejoicing in hope, persevering in trials, being committed to prayer, sharing in the needs of the saints, and showing hospitality to strangers.

Dear friends in Christ,

What do I speak about when my call to this congregation is coming to an end? I thought of Elijah's dramatic departure in a fiery chariot. Or there was Paul's farewell to the Ephesians, when he and the leaders knelt on the beach, in tears, because he told them they would not see him again because he was heading for imprisonment and death. But texts like these would in the end be about me when I want to talk about Christ. What parting word do I bring you? It is this: serve the Lord, love one another and carry out his mission.

Serve the Lord. Listen to the qualifying words: **With a spirit on fire, serve the Lord.** Where does the fire in our spirits come from? For me, it began with a friend inviting me to Youth for Christ rallies in the town hall. They had no impact on me at all, or so I thought. One morning, sitting on the edge of the bed, I heard a distinct and clear voice say: "I love you." I was getting ready for another day of school in year 12, wondering about the books I needed to put in my bag.

Therefore, it could not have been a voice I generated. You can't build an enduring faith on a voice, no matter how real but it was for me an intense experience of being filled or like being in a room that is filled with a presence. And that presence has never left me. You cannot so easily explain away waking up at 1:00am praying or wanting to read the Bible from beginning to end when you have never done that before – and that practice has never ceased. Nor has the sense that someone else is within you besides the usual internal voice. Yes, there was a spirit of fire within because my Father had met me with love and the promise of a future with him. That year, I

completely changed course, abandoned my enrolment to study forestry at university and instead, applied for admission to Luther Seminary, as it was called then.

When **your spirit is on fire, you can rejoice in hope, persevere in trials and be committed to prayer.** Renewal in the church won't come from maintaining the structures, having a large youth group, meeting budgets, fundraising, repairing buildings etc, all necessary things, of course. A fresh desire to serve comes through the Holy Spirit, who with Christ, builds the church. The Holy Spirit comes through speaking and hearing the word of the gospel and from **being born again** in holy baptism, which is **water and the Spirit.**

Remember Thomas was not there when the risen Christ met the disciple and vowed, he would not believe. Yet, he stayed in the room and a week later met his glorious Lord. You cannot be on fire if you are not in this room; stay in the room and eventually you will hear Christ speaking to you.

Serve the Lord and now, love one another. It is the adverbs and adjectives that say something to us: **with brotherly and sisterly love, tenderly love one another.** There are many cultures based on family love but there is only one society that is based on strangers and unrelated people, and that is a Christian one. The church is a new humanity created in the image of Christ. Didn't Jesus say about non family members, **these are my brothers and my sisters,** pointing to those listening to his word? Being one family in Christ and united to his body, we have a new found sensitivity towards others. The love of Christ makes us care for each other, **sharing in the needs of the saints, treating them with honour,** especially if they are more vulnerable than you are, perhaps lonely, suffering an illness, or facing a loss. Let your love be tender, kindly, never pushy and see what a new and beautiful community the church is.

Finally, carry out the Lord's mission. When Peter responded to Christ's invitation to walk on the water towards him, eleven remained in the boat. I wonder if those eleven regretted that decision? Reaching out to folk involves a risk, the risk of committing yourself, making your faith known and touching on personal things. I am glad Paul included the sentence: **showing hospitality to strangers.** Christ made the effort to come to us with his gift of life and salvation when we were strangers to him and we take the same approach,

moving towards the unknown folk, the visitors, the people we meet at table tennis and the English Conversation Club. Warmth, kindness and sharing what we have is where we start and as we get to know people, we can invite them to explore who Jesus is.

To me, this all makes sense. The connecting factor is really the offering of oneself: we offer ourselves to the Lord in service, we offer ourselves to each other in love and then, offer ourselves to the stranger with acceptance and the message of the gospel. We are not inward, centred on ourselves, but outward, centred on Christ, each other and strangers. Do these things, and you will thrive as a congregation.