

Loving one another

In the gospel reading, we heard Jesus say:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

As Dennis takes up this new ministry here, and the congregations and the diocese welcome and receive him, let us take a few minutes to think about the form that ‘loving one another’ might take.

There are some things that are surprising and a little different from the usual about being here with Dennis this evening.

Dennis comes to this post with considerable experience of life and ministry. He was born in Ohio, grew up in Pennsylvania, and educated in Illinois and Toronto. He was ordained in Ontario, and has served as a priest in Canada, the USA, Zambia and England. Latterly Dennis has been a member of the Community of the Resurrection, in Mirfield, Yorkshire, so comes to take up these Charges after ten years as living as part of a monastic community.

How surprising then that the wind of the Spirit should blow him this way. It is not often that a person moves from being a monk to a Rector, but to do this here, among us, should cause us to stop and reflect on what God is doing, and what might be ahead as we commit to ‘loving one another’.

There are many insights from monastic life that will inform the shape of Dennis’s ministry, things that he can see right now, and other things that will unfold as he begins to establish a life of prayer and pastoral care, preaching and mission in these churches.

So when it comes to understanding the form that ‘loving one another’ might take here, there are three insights from monastic life that might inform the ministry that you embark on together on this day. These three are: stability, conversion, and hospitality.

When monks speak about 'stability' they are commonly meaning that they have made a commitment to live in one community. This often has one geographical location, but stability means more than staying and living in one place. 'Stability' describes a commitment to others, to living in one place with God and others, to recognising that those who God has set you amongst are a gift to you, and you to them. 'Stability' describes relationships that must survive not just through happy early days or good times, but also through days which are demanding of patience and character, days which test the capacity for loving of all the parties involved. Stability is demanding of monks, who as brothers together live the same life, holding property in common. Stability is also demanding of all of us who live a secular life, a life outside of a religious community, where we have very different levels of resources and authority. Our differences, and the expectations they bring, mean that we sometimes struggle to see beyond the material, that which clearly presents itself, to the spiritual reality that shapes each one of us.

Dennis is moving from the religious life to the secular, from being one brother among many, to the taking up of the role of Rector, with all its spiritual authority. Even so, he is still called to a lived stability with you and with God. These churches need a stable ministry such as this, so we pray for a deep and life giving stability for you all. For this to come to be you will need to learn to love one another, deeply valuing each other as a blessing from God.

The second insight from monastic life we consider is conversion. In the monastic tradition conversion is not that moment when we turn to Christ acknowledging him as Lord. Rather, it is the life long process, rooted in baptism and the life of the Spirit, through which a person is transformed into the image of Christ. It is the turning of one's entire being towards God. For a monk this conversion happens in an abbey, for us it happens in the midst of our daily lives, lived in relationship with others with whom we pray and worship.

In recent years the life of prayer that Dennis has lived has consisted of the four set Offices of the day, and the times of private prayer that have sustained his personal relationship with God. As for any priest who comes to a new place, all of this is disrupted and will have to settle, with time, into a new rhythm and pattern. Dennis will pray for you, and you must pray for him – and those who live locally not just for him, but with him. As you settle into a shared life of prayer the Spirit will not just sustain you and inspire you but convert you – making you more like Jesus.

And I tell you something you already know – there is much scepticism about religion out and about, but most people can tell when they are meeting a Christian person who has something a little bit different about them. They might sense something lively, something real, something compassionate and kind. What they are sensing, but maybe don't realise, is that they are with someone who has been with Jesus this day. Dennis will endeavour to spend time with Jesus each day – and you, the people of God in this place, must give him company in this as often as you can. Through this – together – you will know conversion. Through this you will encounter the love of God for yourselves, and this is all you need for any day in this life to be transformed.

The final insight from monastic life I turn to is hospitality. When a monastery has spiritual life then people turn up at the door – all kinds of people, often not knowing (really) the reason why they are there. The same is true of churches – where there is spiritual life people turn up, and when they do they need to be shown hospitality. Monastic hospitality is radical, it sees Christ in every visitor – the Rule of Benedict says:

All who arrive as guests are to be welcomed like Christ, for he is going to say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Now this is easier said than done, as you know. Welcoming good, compliant people, people who are like us, is relatively easy, but the thing is that where the Spirit is all kinds of other folk turn up – often those who are searching for a hospitable place where they might be made welcome and loved. For those whose search for hospitality has been long and protracted, finding a place where God is, where they are welcomed as though they are Christ – well this is life changing. It is also church changing, because it disrupts the status quo, and requires us to make space for some who – quite honestly, at first glance – are not that lovely or loveable at all.

And yet the command is the same:

Love one another as I have loved you.

So there is no escaping from this love thing... if you want to be like God (that is to be converted), and if you are called to serve God in these churches (that is to a stability rooted here) then you are also called to a hospitality which is loving.

As you love each other, see Christ in each other, then you will grow in this ministry of hospitality, and there will be room for others.

We come now to institute Dennis, but let's be clear.... All of this is about a new chapter for these churches, and for Dennis himself, with love at the heart of all things – with God at the heart of all things...

Stability, conversion and hospitality – may these be the marks of your common life together.
Thanks be to God.

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