

The cost of love

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on 22 April 2018 – 4th Sunday of Easter & Launch of St Peter's Stewardship Renewal Campaign
Refs: Acts 4. 5-12, 1 John 3. 16-24, John 10. 11 – 18

Jesus said: *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'*

One of the striking things about human life is that the things which are most important and valuable, are free. You cannot buy them. And yet the irony is that the things which *are* free, which you cannot buy, cost you everything.

For example, I am very glad that, in this country today, you cannot buy a wife or husband. Marriage is a gift (apart from the ceremony of course) but marriage itself is free. Yet it costs you everything you have and everything you are. I was once at the Signing of the Registers and the bridegroom was about to sign when one of the bridal party jokingly said to him "watch out, you're about to sign your life away!" I looked at him very straight and said "Actually, yes."

I'm also glad that in this country today you cannot legally buy a baby. Having a baby is free, yet what is there in life that will cost you more than bringing up a child from birth to adulthood?

This is also true of the great gift of friendship. You cannot buy friends. Yet to develop a true friendship requires commitment. It has a real cost. And what is more valuable than a really good friend?

But the greatest example of all is the love of God given to us in Jesus. And the point is we can never buy the love of God, and we can never earn the love of God by our good behaviour. The good news of the Christian gospel is that God's love is completely freely given to us. And yet, as Jesus taught, it will cost us everything – all we have and all we are.

The most important things in life are completely free and yet, they cost us everything.

Today's Gospel reading says the same thing the other way round. *'I am the good shepherd'*, says Jesus. *"and I lay down my life for the sheep."*

This is the costly love of Jesus – Jesus who gave everything, who held nothing back. By contrast the hired hand looks after the sheep only when it suits him. As soon as there's a whiff of danger, he abandons the flock. That's cost-free, pain-free leadership. Jesus is exactly the opposite. His leadership is the costly leadership of love, love that gives everything, that holds nothing back, that lays down his life for the sheep. That is the love that God gives us freely, in Jesus.

So how do we respond to the costly love of Jesus, to the love of God given to us so freely in Jesus? I want to suggest three ways we might respond to this costly love of Jesus our Good Shepherd.

The first is Gratitude – to respond with grateful hearts and grateful lives. I've been reading about gratitude in the book "Being mindful, being Christian – a guide to mindful discipleship". It points out the strongly beneficial effects of gratitude on our sense of wellbeing. But it also points out that gratitude is a habit which has to be learned.

We're not good at gratitude in British society. We tend to be negative, critical or cynical, sometimes with good reason! But these things are the enemy of gratitude.

Gratitude is a habit that has to be learned. I tried it one day, writing down all the quite practical things I must be grateful for. I was surprised to find that in no time at all I had filled a whole sheet of paper. Try it!

So how do we show our gratitude to God for all that he gives us and for his great love for us in Jesus? Firstly, in worship and prayer. We come to church and say thank you to God. We can pray at home and not just ask for things but also say thank you to God. And we can live lives of gratitude – grateful lives.

We can also express our gratitude by giving something back - giving our time, energy, talents and money back to God as a sign of our gratitude for all of God's goodness to us.

Yes I've got to money at last! Because the first reason for us to give financially, as it were back to God, is as a mark of our gratitude to God. Giving back to God something that is significant and costly to us as a way of saying thank you to God for his great love for us.

'I am the good shepherd,' says Jesus. 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

The second way we could respond to the great love of God is to follow Jesus' example, learning to live as disciples of Jesus. So just as Jesus gave everything and held nothing back, so we too begin to learn to give God everything and hold nothing back.

As our second reading from the letter of John puts it:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

That is true discipleship; laying down our lives as Jesus laid down his life for us; caring for those around us in need; and living a life of practical love, practical action. Learning to be disciples of Jesus, learning to follow his example. That is a huge challenge and something that will take all our lives and more. But it gives a different context when we think about our giving. Because it means that all our money, and all we have, belongs to God. *"All things come from you and of your own do we give you."* So we ask God to guide us how to use our money, acknowledging it all belongs to God. We ask God to guide us as we think what to spend on what and what we should give to who.

That is the second reason for giving our money – because it all belongs to God anyway, and we are asking God to help us to learn to live as disciples of Jesus in the way that we use our money and our time, energy and talents.

'I am the good shepherd,' says Jesus. 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

What is the third way we might respond to the great love of God shown to us in Jesus? I would suggest by sharing the good news of this great love of God with others.

We are fortunate. By being here we know the great secret, that the Creator of the Universe is a God of love – a God whose love is free, a God who loves each one of us personally and individually. And we have a calling to share that good news with those around us. As Jesus says in the Gospel reading:

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”

Jesus is almost certainly talking here of the Gentiles – the non-Jews. He is saying that the good news of his love is not only for his own people, the Jews, but for all people everywhere. In the same way I believe he would say to us that the good news of his love is not only for us here in church but for the whole of our community.

That is why I am so glad that our PCC and our Team last autumn both agreed that our number one priority as a church is to be a church for our local community. That is why we employ a children and families’ worker, not only to lead our children’s work at church but also to find ways to reach out to other children and families in our community. We will be looking for other ways to reach out to our community in the coming years. I ask for your prayers for our mission and ministry in our community.

I ask for your prayers that God will enable us to fulfil our calling to mission and ministry in our community, and that God will help us when resources are tight, that our mission and ministry will not be held back. I invite all of us prayerfully to consider our giving specifically to St Peter’s church, not because we want to look after ourselves, but so that we are able to fulfil this vision and calling, to share the great love of God in Jesus here in our community of Wolvercote.

So as we enter this period of thinking about our giving here at St Peter’s Church, I want to leave you with those three thoughts about our giving.

Gratitude - in response to God’s great love for us, we want to give something back to express our gratitude to God for all his goodness to us.

Discipleship - as Jesus gave everything for us, we want to learn to follow his example, acknowledging everything we have belongs to him, and giving freely as he gave freely for us.

Mission – as we ourselves have discovered the great love of God given for us in Jesus, so we want both to pray and give that we as a church may be able to fulfil our calling to share his love in this community around us.

Thank you.