

LLF 1 – Living well together – 5 & 12 Sep

1. Who knows why next Sat 18 September is so important for millions of people across Britain?
 - a. Launch of the 2021 series of Strictly Come Dancing with some contestants I have actually heard of this year.
 - b. I enjoy watching it with my family, because it is full of energy, fun and sparkling and it is lovely to watch some great dancing or laugh at some that's not so great, and to see celebrities improve over the weeks
 - c. But Strictly would not be the same without the judges –their insights, caustic comments, encouragements, catchphrases and their marks out of 10! And we all love to judge both the performers and judges ourselves too!
 - d. We all love to judge other people and particularly with regards to the issues of identity, relationships, marriage and sexuality that our Living in Love and Faith course is about.
2. Today we begin a series of sermons that will sit alongside this Living in Love and Faith course we will be doing in small groups in a week's time to help us reflect theologically on important issues of identity, relationships, marriage and sexuality.
 - a. For many, especially in the church, this area covers controversial and sensitive issues and I suspect makes them feel uncomfortable. So the church, especially the ordinary C of E worshipper, hasn't really engaged with these issues too much, trying to avoid conflict, but at the same time causing hurt to many who feel excluded because of their gender identity, sexuality or marriage status.
 - b. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace, but his peace wasn't about avoiding difficult subjects, rather tackling them head on, especially with those in power in order to bring about the true peace that comes from righteous and just living between people.
 - c. And so as we start this series we are first going to look at what it means to Live Well together as a community of God's people who will disagree about all sorts of things, including these topics, but who through a shared love of Christ and his people learn how to discuss contentious issues and live alongside each other despite difference. And we are going to think about how we judge people affects how we can live together well.
3. In order to live well together as we discuss difficult issues there are 6 pastoral principles for us to consider.
 - a. **1. Addressing ignorance** – we can't properly consider and discuss important issues like these if we are ignorant about them, especially theological and scientific understanding. Ignorance was a big reason for centuries of racism in this country (and still is) - white people just hadn't got to know people of colour, what was important to them and why and so treated them differently.
 - b. I think it is similar for issues of sexuality. We all know single and married people, probably divorced people, but do we know people who are transgender or have same-sex attraction? If not how can we really understand the issues they face? I admit I was pretty ignorant about same-sex attraction until a family member 'came out' and I have done a lot of reading and talking since. So it is important to learn from people with different perspectives and lived experiences.
 - c. **2. Acknowledging prejudice** – this is related to ignorance as so much prejudice stems from ignorance. Like it or not we all have prejudices, we just don't always realise it or acknowledge it. We can be prejudiced about people of different race, class, education, sexuality, belief system etc which shows

itself in the way we think about and treat people like ourselves differently from people unlike us. But we don't like to admit it, even to ourselves.

- d. **3. Admitting hypocrisy** – Jesus spoke out about hypocrisy many times, including Matthew 7 and we'll think more about that later. Like it or not we will all be hypocrites at times. I love the way children point out faults in their parents and carers - "You said I could only have one slice of toast, but you're having two", - they can spot hypocrisy (at least in others) and we are similar.
 - e. There are lots of areas in the realm of relationships, marriage and sexuality where Christians condemn certain behaviours but turn a blind eye to others. The pastoral principles are about being painfully honest, at least to ourselves, about our faults, so we can be open to others who hold different views to us.
 - f. **4. Casting out fear** – One of my favourite verses is 1 John 1:18 – "perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment." Fear can be prevalent in discussions in these areas, because of the view we hold and potentially the lifestyle associated with it. We may be afraid people will criticise us or judge us, whether we are conservative or liberal on these areas, so we are not open about our views. If we can be a loving Christian community we can be open and vulnerable with each other without fear of judgment, but with understanding and love even if we disagree with others.
 - g. **5. Speaking into silence** - Jesus spoke about difficult subjects of his day, like the purpose of the sabbath, he was not afraid of controversy. Jesus said in Mark 4:22 "Whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open." There has been much silence on these issues in recent times in the church, but we need to bring them out into the light so we can reflect on them together. To keep them hidden is about living in fear, which is not the way for Christians.
 - h. **6. Paying attention to power** – we like to be in control of others, to be in charge, to hold power which is often found in the status quo. Dictators like Robert Mugabe, former Zimbabwe leader, can't let go of power, even when extremely old and unpopular, they do everything to hold on to it. We need to think whether there is any of that holding on to power and control in our views in these areas, remembering that God's spirit alone can bring transformation into lives.
 - i. The wonderful passage from Philippians 2 speaks of Jesus' attitude to power. As God, he had all the power in the universe, but didn't abuse it for personal gain. Rather the Lord of creation humbled himself to become a lowly servant of us, his creation, through his lifestyle and submission to death. He is an example for us to make sure we don't hold on to power through our beliefs.
4. Sorry, this is not easy listening is it? You may wish you had stayed in bed this morning rather than be challenged!
- a. But being a Christian is about being honest and brave, open to the Holy Spirit challenging us.
 - b. Now with regards to the issues that Living in Love and Faith addresses we need to both **listen** and **speak**.
 - c. Listen to the experience of others, often painful, the reasons they are as they are, believe what they believe without judgment.
 - d. And it is about speaking. Sharing our experiences and beliefs openly and vulnerably, not being afraid to speak what we believe is the truth, even if we think others will disagree with it.

- e. But in both listening and speaking we need to do it with love and not judgment. But let's face it we love judging others. Partly why TV progs like Strictly are so popular.
 - f. We also love to judge people's appearances – a new hair cut will always get comments. And we love to judge people's behaviour – "he shouldn't have said that!" or "I can't believe she did that!" or "the vicar was a bit intense today!"
 - g. At one level judging people is fine, it's very human. We all judged Emma Raducanu this week and were amazed at her skill and calmness under pressure. Judging is how we understand people and affects how we relate to them. But at another level it is dangerous, because so often we judge people we barely know on how they look or on a single statement or action, without knowing context, their background, their struggles, their culture, religion or sexuality.
 - h. For instance we hate it if someone judges us as rude, because we didn't stop to talk, when we are in a hurry due to a family crisis, but we easily do it to others.
5. Jesus' words in Matthew 7 challenge us through that vivid imagery of a speck and a log in the eye
- a. We can all see other people's faults – when they use bad language, or interrupt you when you're talking, or eat too many cakes etc, and we are quick to gossip to others about these faults.
 - b. But how many of us realise that we sometimes do these things, and worse! That we are careless with our words and hurt others; that we have anger issues we haven't resolved; that we are ignorant or prejudiced or hypocritical?
 - c. Jesus uses the imagery of a speck and log in the eye, not necessarily to say that our faults are worse than theirs (who are we to judge severity of faults anyway?), but rather to make clear which is most important for us to deal with.
 - d. A speck is annoying, but you can still see, whereas a log will blind you. Other people's faults aren't primarily our concern, but our faults are. Yet many of us love to talk about other people's faults far more than address their own.
 - e. And Jesus goes on to say that if we can address those logs in our lives, then we are in a position to help other people's specks. I think this is primarily because people are much more likely to accept our help in dealing with their own faults if they see in us someone who has addressed their own, has made themselves vulnerable by talking about their problems, rather than someone coming across as disapproving and judgmental.
 - f. When it comes to judgment let's remember that God is the ultimate judge. He knows everything about us, even the things we have kept secret from others. And Jesus says in v2 that if we judge people harshly that's how God will judge us, whereas if we judge people lightly God will judge us lightly.
6. As your vicar I want to see this church and this parish Live Well Together and in many ways I see that, but we are not perfect
- a. As we embark on this Living in Love and Faith course I want everyone who can, to join in with as much of it as you can, even if you can't make every session. Because it will help to address ignorance, speak into silence and help us learn to address our own fears.
 - b. It will also help us understand each other as the body of Christ both in this parish and across the wider church.

- c. I really don't want people thinking it doesn't relate to me, it's too difficult a subject for me, I have a particular set of views that won't change, because those reasons make us judges and create barriers in helping us live well together.
- d. We need to hear your voice on these matters of identity, relationships, marriage and sexuality whatever they are, and you need to hear other people's views, and reflect biblically on these important subjects.
- e. If you are unsure then please come on one of the taster courses this week to find out more, but please let me know today or tomorrow.
- f. It may not be easy, but it is a great course, it will be rewarding and will help us get to know each other better to enables us to live well together as the people God wants us to be. Amen