

Sermon, Trinity 9: Ephesians 4. 1-16; John 6. 24-35.

Last Sunday, there was an item in the paper about men's T-shirts, especially those sporting graphics and slogans. Not long ago my daughter gave me a T-shirt with the words "A beautiful world... starts with you" emblazoned on it. Now I know that Liz is very fond of me, but I don't think that the message on the T-shirt was suggesting that it's my presence and good looks that make the world a beautiful place. No, I think the message of the T-shirt was that each of us must play our part in keeping the earth the beautiful planet that God created.

But back to the newspaper article. One of the T-shirts that grabbed my attention was the one with the Nike icon and the slogan "Just do it." It struck me that that is quite a good summary of what Paul is saying in today's reading from his letter to the church at Ephesus.

But first let's have a look at what Jesus is saying to us in John's gospel.

We're told that the crowd had come searching for Jesus – and that in itself was a good thing. Would that more people today were searching for Jesus! But Jesus was concerned about their motives for searching for him.

At this point we need to remember that it was only the day before that Jesus had performed the miracle that we know as the feeding of the five thousand, after which the same crowd had wanted, John tells us, to make Jesus king by force.

So when they now come looking for him, Jesus comments, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw the miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life."

In other words Jesus is suggesting that their reasons for searching for him and for wanting to make him king are entirely materialistic – they want a free lunch and they want a political Messiah who will free them from the yoke of the hated Roman occupying forces.

Jesus, on the other hand, wants them to recognise their spiritual needs: their need to put themselves right with God. What he offers them is spiritual food, food that will endure to eternal life.

To understand this exchange between Jesus and the crowd more fully, we need to reflect on the terms in which this exchange takes place.

The crowd's references to Moses giving their forefathers manna in the desert and the challenge to Jesus to do something similar are drawn from the story of the Israelites being led by Moses from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. Jesus reminds the crowd that it was not Moses who gave them the manna, but God.

And he adds that God is now giving them something even greater – the true bread from heaven. And whereas the manna fed them on the way to the Promised Land of Cana, the bread which God is now giving them will feed them on the way to the Kingdom of God, for it is food that endures to eternal life.

And that food is Jesus himself, for as he says, "The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

The crowd find this difficult to understand, for they are still taking Jesus' words literally, they are still thinking of the way in which the day before he had literally given them bread, and they are still remembering the physical food, the manna, that was provided for their ancestors as they journeyed through the desert on the way to the Promised Land, and so they ask Jesus to give them the bread to which he has referred.

Jesus' response is to make what the Jews would have found the most startling of claims, for in saying, "I am the bread of life," he uses the words which according to the Old Testament are used by God to identify himself when Moses asks him what name he should use when telling the Israelites that he has been sent by God to lead them out of Egypt.

God tells Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I am has sent me to you."

Jesus is using for **himself** the name which God had appropriated for **himself**. The message is clear, Jesus is claiming that God has now come into the world in the person of Jesus. And as we know that is something that the Jews found difficult to accept.

The reason why God has come into the world in the person of Jesus is mentioned twice in the passage: to provide the food that endures to eternal life and to give life to the world.

So what is that life?

First, of course, it is the life that comes from Jesus having, through the cross, put us right with God – eternal life spent in the presence of our loving heavenly Father.

But it also refers to the life which we enjoy in the here and now. Because of what Jesus has done for us and what he has taught us, our life has purpose and meaning.

We know what God wants of us; we know the kind of life that he wants us to live.

We have the answer to the question which the crowd put to Jesus when he told them to work not for food that spoils but for the food that endures to eternal life.

The crowd asked Jesus, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

His response was, “The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent.”

That’s all, to believe in Jesus. Not as the Jews might have expected him to say, to keep to the Law of Moses.

And in return for eternal life and living life to the full now, that’s what God asks of us – to believe in Jesus.

Now, of course, that’s not as simple as it sounds. It doesn’t just mean saying, yes, I believe in Jesus. Yes, I believe he’s the Son of God.

That’s part of it, but it also means believing what he taught, both by his words and his actions, and putting that into practice in our own lives.

Or as Paul puts it: living “a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Central to that life is the quality of love, which Paul refers to three times in our reading.

First it appears in the phrase “bearing with one another in love.” Here Paul mentions it in relation to patience, and it would appear that he is here referring to relationships within the church. We are called to be patient with one another. Now the fact that Paul uses the word “bearing” suggests that this might not always be easy. For me “bearing” carries overtones of “putting up with,” as in “I couldn’t bear it.”

Now we may sometimes find ourselves thinking in that way about other members of the church, but if we do, we must remember what Paul is saying here: we must bear with them in love.

What Paul is doing is reminding us of Jesus' command that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. In other words, we should have their best interests at heart. Now that doesn't mean that we have to like them. This kind of love is not an emotion. Rather it may require an exercise of the will.

And it's an exercise of the will with a particular purpose in mind. Paul calls us to bear with one another in love in order maintain the unity of the church, to keep the peace within the church community. Sadly it is not unknown for churches to split over differences of opinion. We've seen it happen for example, first over the ordination of women and then over women becoming bishops, in some cases with the parish priest and part of his congregation "going over to Rome" – joining the Catholic church.

And today, the Anglican Church is engaging with another potentially divisive issue – same sex relationships. And in looking at this subject, we are being asked to do what Paul is doing here – start from the standpoint of love. This is why the bishops are asking us to participate in a project known as "Living in Love and Faith."

Some in our two churches have already engaged with this project, and everyone will have the opportunity to do so in the autumn.

The hope is that by bearing with one another in love, we'll be able to maintain the unity of the church and live together in peace, even though we may have differing opinions on the subject. If differ we must, we are asked to differ in love and stay in relationship with each other.

Paul's second reference to love comes when he writes about "speaking the truth in love." At this point he's warning the Ephesians against being led astray by those who are trying to undermine Christ's teaching by advancing ideas, or doctrines, that have no basis in Christ's words and actions.

Paul appeals to his readers to adhere to the truths which are the basis of their faith and to challenge those who would lead them astray, but to challenge them in love.

And this leads to Paul's third reference to love. If we do adhere to the basic truths of the Christian faith, rather than following every new fashion in belief –

such as the claim at the end of the last century and the beginning of this, which started with the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, that God was blessing people by giving them gold teeth or gold fillings, a claim that has since quietly disappeared – if we do keep to the basic truths, then we shall grow into mature Christians and the body of the church will be built up in love.

So, then, to sum up: we are called by Jesus to believe in him, with our belief influencing the way in which we live. And the way in which we live a life worthy of our calling is described by Paul, with an emphasis on the importance of love in the way in which we relate to our fellow Christians.

But if we take Jesus as our example, we shall see that he didn't just restrict his acts of love to his fellow Jews. Rather he was prepared to extend his love to the Syro-phenician woman whose daughter he healed, to the Roman centurion whose servant he healed and to the woman he met at the well in Samaria.

So we, too, should follow Jesus' example and extend his love to all those around us, so, in the words of the T-shirt I mentioned at the beginning of this reflection: let's "just do it!" Amen.