

Sermon Epiphany 4C 2022

Do you ever remember saying, "I want that cookie, the big one." Or "I want a new pair of jeans with – whatever design label meant most to you" or "I want a new bike, again specified." Does that sound like you when you were growing up? Now to be honest I do not remember saying things like that. Is it a case of my conveniently short memory, or was life different back in the nineteen forties and fifties. But as a mom I do remember my kids saying, "I want" – whatever it was and they knew my answer was always, "I want, doesn't get." When I was at the cathedral years ago I led a discussion group about parenting. Certainly, the parents who joined the group said that dealing with the demands of their kids was a challenge, especially when the kids saw many ads on the TV about things they should have which would make them better, faster, prettier, smarter, win the admiration of their peers, succeed in life generally. The ads tried to make it hard to for the kids to reject them and doubly hard for parents who obviously did not wish to pay for every new item offered and had to teach their kids that "no" was an acceptable answer to prompts to "buy me."

But it seems that the people in Jesus own town/village of Nazareth had lots on their "I want list." It seems he knew that and told them so. It seems they reckoned he was there just to provide for them and it sounded as though he should hurry up and get on with doing it. Afterall he was their boy, wasn't he? They knew he had been working wonders in other places so they expected he would do the same and better for them. They all had "wants" to be satisfied. There were people who were sick, were lame, had conditions such as blindness or deafness, had mental challenges. They knew he could heal them so they wanted that right now. They also knew he had turned several large jars of water into very tasty wine. They would love some nice wine too.

But then Jesus really freaked them out. He told them that God cared for others besides them, he reminded them that God had a special relationship with people who were foreigners, not even Jews. Really Jesus! It was not OK to say such things. You heard the Gospel story today. Jesus was there speaking to them; having read from the scroll of Isaiah he told the people that the scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. Did they understand what he was implying, probably not, but maybe that bit sounded OK. But in fact, when Jesus said it was fulfilled, he meant it in a way totally different from their understanding. He brought up the prophet Elijah; probably the greatest prophet of all, they would have thought. But Jesus reminded them that Elijah knew God had directed him to go to be nurtured by a foreign woman, who lived at Zarephath, up near Tyre, (Lebanon today) definitely not a Jewish village. If that wasn't bad enough, he went on to remind them that another great prophet, Elisha who had healing powers only healed one person with leprosy and he was Naaman the Syrian. Yes, it was mystifying that he healed a Syrian when there must have been many Jews suffering from leprosy. The people did not want to be reminded of these facts. They wanted to have God as their God and thus Jesus as their personal Jesus; not someone to run after foreigners. Someone must then have said, "Jesus go away, we are going to get rid of you." Even if there is no big cliff in Nazareth the Gospel message is clear; Jesus with his message was not wanted. They wanted their own personal Jesus who would say and do things the way they wanted. A Jesus who showed God loved the whole of God's creation was not acceptable. You can imagine their conversation, "God chose us, and we want our special relationship with God to be as we think it is, thank you very much."

Do you think God is special to you or to our nation or special? We say and sing "God bless America," but do we mean God bless only America? When we are at war or in conflict are we asking

God to bless just us and to shun our enemies, make sure we win and they lose? How did you feel about the Iraqis, the Afghans, the Japanese in the 1940s? Did you pray for any of them? Do you pray for those with opposing view points today?

When you place this Gospel message alongside the other reading you heard how are you digesting them all? Jeremiah shared how God called him. He, like many prophets and leaders such as Moses tried to wriggle out of serving God in such a ministry. But it is never surprising that when a human tries to argue with God, the human always loses. So, as you know, Jeremiah did become a prophet who was assisted and supported by God. Have you listened to God? Are you aware of how and for what ministry God has called you? It can be ministry in a specific community outside of Messiah or in a community here. There are many opportunities for ministry here. But life at home always involves ministry. There is always ministry with those you love. It can be ministry from home if you live alone as it matters not whether they live with you or not. If they are people on your heart they are people you have a ministry with.

Some years ago a group of us went to the Church of the Good Shepherd in Ringwood and worked in ministry with the leaders there so that together we could offer kids from the area the fun of a week's Vacation Bible Camp. It was a combined ministry, we joined their leaders, all serving together. We were all called to serve. Their leader, Melissa, was called to lead it. The following year we were called to be in Newark at the House of Prayer, in ministry with leaders there, again to offer a week's Vacation Bible Camp. But Melissa wanted to repeat the excellent camp experience of the previous year and asked, would we go again. That actually meant some of us (Julie, Linda, Vicky, and I) agreed to do two Vacation camp weeks that year – but yes. we could do it. We knew we were called to return and support her and the other leaders. In fact, we did a third year with them. When you are in ministry together and offering kids an opportunity for a relationship with Jesus, sharing his Gospel of love yes, you can do it. There was no camp there the following year, but we had an invitation to go to Newark again which we accepted. Yes, we were called to serve in ministry; we accepted, because we were a group who loved working with children and loved working together and with other adults, and we loved spending a week living together.

That is the link to the Epistle today. The Apostle Paul sent a beautiful message of love, the true meaning of love as he saw it. Not romantic love or even brotherly love but agape, unconditional love. You have probably heard this passage read at a wedding and maybe you have sentimentalized it. But Paul was not talking about a state of bliss which may or may not exist for the newly married couple. He was talking about how you should focus on living a life full of love forever. Think about his words about what it means to love unconditionally. He said love is patient and kind. Both those are challenging. Are you always patient and always kind? I seem to get frequently impatient with myself these days, definitely not a loving attitude and I know I should love myself too. Then think of the things he says love is not – it is not envious or boastful or irritable or rude or resentful. Of course, none of you are ever irritable and never resentful!! That last one can be a challenging one, it is so easy to be resentful about something someone said or did, isn't it? Continuing, Paul wrote love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Have you ever felt good about doing something wrong because you got away with it?

St. Paul was not the only person to speak about living in and with love, in fact he is sharing Jesus' message. Jesus had love as his theme in his message to his disciples at the Last Supper. "Love one another as I have loved you," he told them. A few days earlier he had been asked which was the

greatest commandment. He said it was to love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength, and then to love your neighbor as you love yourself. So, St Paul in this letter was really reiterating Jesus' focus on love but with more specifics. So, I ask, what does "living in love" mean to you? Do you intentionally practice it? The season of Lent is just 5 weeks away. Have you thought of taking up "living in love" as your focus this year?

Returning to Jesus, always a good thing to do – right?. He reminded people of God's love for foreigners. If you say God loves all the people God created, how can you say you don't love some of them? The world is a challenging place and yes, there are people with evil in their hearts. But our God, the God of love calls you to show love. That was how Jesus lived his earthly life and that is what he taught us all. So today remember his call to you and his call for you to love his people, all his people, just as he loves you. Amen